REVERENCE

SHRADDHA

Original Maithili Short Story collection authored by

Jagdish Prasad Mandal

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Translated into English by

Dr. Ram Ashish Singh

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Maithili Short Stories for Children and Adolescents

Jagdish Prasad Mandal

Translated from the original Maithili by

Dr. Ram Ashish Singh

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Berma/Nirmali

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Translated from the Maithili short story collection 'Shraddha'
Authored by Jagdish Prasad Mandal
Translated into English by Dr. Ram Ashish Singh

REVERENCE is the English translation of Shraddha, a Maithili short story collection by Jagdish Prasad Mandal, translated by Dr. Ram Ashish Singh. The book brings together ten stories originally written for children and adolescents, yet they resonate deeply with thoughtful adult readers as well.

Set in the lived realities of rural and semi-urban Mithila, these narratives gently introduce young readers to questions of responsibility, fairness, labour, faith, learning, and human dignity- through everyday situations rather than explicit moral instruction. Mandal's storytelling respects the moral intelligence of young minds, allowing values to emerge organically through dialogue, observation, and quiet reflection.

Here, reverence transcends ritual belief, taking shape as an ethical sensibility grounded in empathy, restraint, and social awareness. The translation preserves the calm, accessible tone of the original, ensuring clarity without sacrificing depth.

REVERENCE offers young readers a thoughtful introduction to literature that nurtures conscience as much as imagination.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to children and adolescents whose growing minds come to understand reverence not merely as ritual, but as a lived expression of empathy, responsibility, and respect in everyday life.

- Dr. Ram Ashish Singh

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Preface

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For several years, I have read and translated the works of Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal with sustained attention. Over time, my engagement with his writing has evolved beyond translation into a form of intellectual companionship. Through rendering several of his works into English and undertaking a critical study of his novel Pangu, I have come to recognise a steady moral continuity running through his fiction. His disciplined and uninterrupted creative practice across decades, acknowledged through significant literary recognitions at the national level, reflects not only consistency but depth of vision. The present volume, titled Reverence, marks another significant stage in this ongoing journey of reading, reflection, and translation, an engagement shaped as much by ethical attentiveness as by linguistic responsibility.

Mandal's literary universe is firmly rooted in the soil of rural Mithila, yet its concerns extend far beyond regional boundaries. His narratives arise from village life, including agricultural rhythms, caste negotiations, generational tensions, ritual observances, and everyday speech. These outward settings, however, function as more than descriptive backdrops; they form the living ground upon which deeper ethical questions

emerge. His fiction rarely seeks spectacle or dramatic exaggeration. Instead, it consistently turns toward the formation of character, the discipline of conduct, and the quiet moral negotiations that shape ordinary existence.

The choice of Reverence as the title of this collection is neither accidental nor ornamental. The story bearing this title occupies the intellectual and ethical center of the volume. A seemingly simple classroom observation about the erosion of mutual respect between teacher and student becomes the point of departure for philosophical inquiry. In this narrative, reverence is neither reduced to fear nor confined within inherited hierarchy. Rather, it is presented as an inward concentration of intention, a sustained and disciplined orientation of the mind. As such steadiness deepens, it matures into conviction; from conviction arises affection. This organic progression from discipline to perception, and from perception to relational warmth resonates throughout the collection.

Across the stories gathered here, Mandal portrays communities negotiating change. The reshaping of caste identities, the emergence of new ritual authorities, the anxieties surrounding self-reliance, and the delicate tension between dependence and preparedness recur as subtle thematic strands. Social transformation is depicted neither as heroic reform nor as moral collapse. Instead, it appears as a continuous process through which individuals respond, adapt, resist, and reorganize their lives. The moral center of Mandal’s fiction lies not in denunciation but in discernment.

One distinctive feature of his writing is his use of dialogue as a vehicle for reflection. Conversations between teacher and student, husband and wife, and parent and child gradually unfold into meditative exchanges. The rural idiom is preserved, yet the thematic range remains expansive. Mandal does not construct abstract philosophical treatises; rather, he allows thought to emerge from lived situations. In doing so, he demonstrates how philosophical insight can arise from the cadence of everyday speech.

Over the years, Mandal has maintained remarkable consistency in his creative practice. His disciplined literary output across short stories and novels reflects a sustained engagement with the moral and social realities of his time. His contributions to Maithili literature have received significant recognition, including national-level honors acknowledging both the depth and breadth of his work. Yet such recognition has not altered the essential tenor of his writing. He remains attentive to foundational concerns: ethical steadiness, social balance, generational responsibility, and the cultivation of inward clarity amid external flux.

For the translator, Mandal presents a particular challenge. His prose carries the cadence of rural speech while unfolding layers of reflection. The translator must preserve this tonal equilibrium, neither flattening the philosophical undercurrents nor overstating them. The task extends beyond lexical substitution; it requires the careful transference of moral temperament. Translation, in this sense, becomes an act of responsibility rather than mere linguistic mediation. In preparing this volume, I have sought to remain faithful to the ethical poise of the original while ensuring clarity

for readers unfamiliar with its cultural context.

The stories in Reverence invite readers to pause and reconsider what appears ordinary. They do not instruct through proclamation or polemic. Rather, they encourage introspection. Whether portraying a farmer contemplating the fragility of life, a student seeking the meaning of respect, or a family negotiating responsibility, the narratives repeatedly return to a central proposition: social harmony cannot endure without inward discipline.

In a time often marked by impatience and moral confusion, Mandal's fiction quietly argues for balance. Authority must be tempered by humility. Independence must be accompanied by foresight. Affection must rest upon conviction. These insights are offered not as rigid prescriptions but as reflections shaped by lived experience.

It is my hope that this translation will enable readers beyond its immediate linguistic community to encounter the reflective world Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal has shaped. If these stories encourage even a brief inward pause, a renewed attentiveness to discipline, responsibility, and reverence, then this work will have fulfilled its purpose.

The Child Is Father of the Man

This opening story explores a transitional moment in the lives of four village boys who, having completed their matriculation examinations, find themselves suspended between results and the future. Their proposed pilgrimage to Mathura, Vrindavan, and Haridwar is not merely an excursion but an attempt to transform uncertainty into experience. The narrative

presents this interval as a formative threshold, where anxiety about education, status, and failure gradually yields to reflection and responsibility.

Through measured conversations with their father and grandfather, the story shifts from youthful impulse to moral awakening. Pilgrimage is subtly redefined: it becomes less about accumulating religious merit and more about understanding life's processes, including birth, love, detachment, and the passage of generations. The elders do not preach; instead, they grant freedom and trust that discernment must arise from within.

The story ultimately affirms that reverence lies not only in sacred destinations but also in filial trust, honest intention, and the courage to engage with the world thoughtfully. In the quiet space between childhood and adulthood, the child begins gently and almost unknowingly to shape the man he is becoming.

The Ground of the Forefathers

In this story, an elderly villager, Hira Kaka, visits Bombay to stay with his son, Sadanand, who has established himself within a thriving urban Maithil community. What initially appears to be a simple generational reunion gradually unfolds into a subtle reflection on migration, aspiration, and inherited belonging. Through quiet observation, the narrative contrasts the organic intimacy of village life with the structured reconstruction of cultural identity in the city.

The weekly "Mithila platform" in Bombay functions as a symbolic re-creation of home. Conversations, performances, and communal gatherings preserve language and memory, yet they also reveal an

undercurrent of displacement. Houses built in villages remain locked, earnings circulate in cities, and ancestral soil survives more as sentiment than as lived continuity.

Hira Kaka's modest dreams, such as flying in an aeroplane or glimpsing film legends, humanize the broader theme of generational transition. The closing remark about preserving the "ground of the forefathers" carries a gentle ambiguity. Is tradition truly sustained, or merely rehearsed? The story suggests that reverence for one's origins cannot rest on organization alone; it requires continuity of spirit, humility, and lived connection.

On the Dice

This story employs the image of pāśā to reflect on life without reducing it to the crude logic of money and possession. Beginning with cultural memory—from the Mahabharata to Pachisi and village idiom—it transitions into a contemporary classroom, where Ravikant Babu, a high school teacher, describes life as a gamble shaped by loss and gain. The narrative's deeper interest lies in the tension that follows: what is a "gamble" for one person may remain a "game" for another.

Bhukhan and Dukhan, two village boys, do not fully grasp the philosophical assertion, yet they recognize the language of dice from everyday experience. Their curiosity leads them beyond the school compound and into the teacher's home, where tea and hospitality become extensions of learning. In this setting, education is presented not merely as instruction but as relationship, built through attention,

patience, and the dignity of being taken seriously.

Rather than offering a definitive conclusion, the story opens an ethical horizon. Ravikant Babu frames understanding as a gradual widening of vision, capable of holding opposites such as day and night, sorrow and joy, fire and water. Reverence here appears as disciplined openness: the willingness to ask, to listen, and to learn without forcing life into a single, fixed meaning.

Circulation

Set in the village of Raghopur, this story examines the recurring practice of the Bhagwat Katha and the subtle tensions that surround it. While the annual recitation at the Brahmasthan has evolved into a shared ritual, household Kathas often expose rivalries of caste, lineage, prestige, and wealth. Devotion, at times, appears entangled with display.

Against this backdrop stands Munilal Kaka, who resists the transformation of faith into spectacle. His refusal to publicize donations suggests that religion loses its integrity when it becomes a contest for recognition. In his view, faith must remain inward rather than amplified for approval.

The narrative's centre, however, rests with Mohan, a young graduate who moves from passive inheritance to critical inquiry. Rather than rejecting tradition, he studies its patterns, origins, and social implications. His shift from individual ambition toward collective reflection signals a generational transition.

The closing insight, "everything is in motion," reframes the entire story. Just as the Gita flowed into

the Bhagwat, ideas, practices, and beliefs circulate across time. Reverence, therefore, lies not in rigid preservation but in conscious transmission, a continuity shaped by reflection rather than rivalry.

The Miser

Set within the framework of a village Durga Puja, this story examines how communal celebration can gradually harden into moral judgment. What begins as a simple question of donation deepens into a reflection on language, ego, and social perception.

Sonelal Kaka, independent in thought and transparent in conduct, is casually labeled a “miser” by younger committee members when he declines to increase his contribution. Rather than reacting defensively, he interrogates the meaning of the word itself. Through measured dialogue, the narrative reveals how society often uses terms imprecisely, reducing complex ethical positions to convenient labels.

The story ultimately shifts attention from money to maturity. It questions not the generosity of wealth but the responsibility of speech. True integrity lies neither in public display nor in hasty accusation, but in disciplined discernment and self-awareness.

Grandfather’s Ledger

Set on the evening of Diwali, this story captures the inner unrest of a young boy who believes he has fallen short in a ritual act of devotion. What begins as a minor delay in placing lamps at village shrines gradually develops into a crisis of conscience. For Kusheshwar, lateness becomes a moral failing.

The narrative gently examines the psychology of comparison within a close-knit rural society. Even faith, when measured against others, turns competitive. The fear of being "behind" reveals how easily religious observance can slip into performance.

Through the calm wisdom of Jiyalal Baba, the story restores perspective. Spiritual worth lies not in precedence or outward speed but in understanding. A festival is neither diminished by delay nor strengthened by haste.

In the end, the ledger that truly matters is inward. What one genuinely understands and lives becomes one's real earning; the rest is noise.

Lost Our Footing

This story unfolds through the reunion of two former classmates whose lives, though rooted in the same village soil, have taken markedly different paths. Baldev's quiet admission, "I lost my footing," becomes the moral centre of the narrative. The phrase suggests not a single failure but a gradual slipping within the larger currents of circumstance.

Before turning to the two men, the narrative lingers on the geography and temperament of neighbouring villages. Fertile land and barren soil, abundance and limitation, prosperity and endurance all function as metaphors for human destiny. Villages, like individuals, inherit uneven conditions yet remain shaped by labour and adaptation.

Gopinath channels aspiration into structured achievement, returning as an engineer. Baldev, gifted in music, pursues a path sustained by devotion and fragile economics. Neither life is simplified into triumph

or failure. Instead, the story reflects on how environment, opportunity, discipline, and drift quietly shape direction.

To lose one's footing is not merely to fall; it is to recognise the subtle moment when intention and circumstance part ways. In that recognition lies both humility and social insight.

You Carried Them Through

This story reflects on retirement not as an ending but as a test of what truly endures. When Ramakant Babu retires, the village sees a teacher leaving his post; Shrikant sees something deeper: a life of steady service that continues beyond designation.

The narrative challenges the notion that employment defines existence. Work tied to position may conclude, but ethical labour persists. Through Ramakant Babu, the story presents a model of quiet integrity: a teacher who refused discrimination, rejected violence in education, and understood that genuine reform begins with families as much as with classrooms.

Shrikant's remark, "You carried our family through," becomes the emotional axis of the piece. The gratitude expressed here is not sentimental; it acknowledges sustained guidance. Ultimately, the story suggests that true legacy lies not in title but in the lives one steadies along the way.

Reverence

Set in a rural high school in Mithila, this title story serves as the intellectual and ethical center of the collection. A seemingly simple classroom remark that

neither teachers nor students now retain reverence for one another unsettles two thoughtful pupils and prompts inquiry rather than resentment. The story moves inward, from assertion to questioning, and from questioning to clarity.

Through Manmohan Babu's measured exposition, reverence is redefined. It is neither fear, blind obedience, nor inherited hierarchy. Rather, it is a focused inward disposition, a disciplined orientation of the mind that gradually deepens into conviction and from conviction into affection. Reverence, therefore, emerges not as ritualized behavior but as moral cultivation.

Set against a broader social climate marked by contradiction and diminishing clarity, the story suggests that the erosion of reverence arises not from weakened authority but from weakened inner discipline. As the volume's title, Reverence signals the collection's overarching concern: restoring balance through thoughtful dialogue, ethical steadiness, and conscious self-examination.

Living on Another's Support

In this closing narrative, the social evolution of Amtahi village becomes a mirror for a deeper human concern. The gradual multiplication of castes, arising from exclusion, adaptation, and ritual restructuring, reflects how communities attempt to secure identity when confronted with disruption. Social order here is neither fixed nor entirely rational; it develops through reaction as much as through intention.

Yet the focus of the story shifts from collective structure to individual anxiety. Through Dularchan

Kaka’s quiet reflections, the central question emerges: what remains when the support on which one stands is suddenly withdrawn? His concern is not property or status but preparedness, whether those who live together are truly capable of standing on their own.

The dialogue with his wife and son carries the narrative into a reflective philosophical register. Dependence, the story suggests, is not merely economic or social; it is fundamentally existential. To live responsibly is to acknowledge uncertainty without yielding to fear. In this manner, the volume concludes not with a definitive resolution but with awakening, the quiet emergence of self-awareness in the next generation.

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The Child is father of the man

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After completing the matriculation examination, Kusumlal considered travelling with his friends to Mathura and Vrindavan, and then continuing on to Haridwar. It was a youthful and loosely formed idea, shared by Kusumlal, Ramakant, Lalit, and Manohar. Although not entirely certain, they had all agreed that each would speak to his own parents or guardians and also reach out to the guardians of the others. They planned to explain that, during the three months between the exam and the announcement of the results, their minds would not be focused on studies. Instead of wasting this time, they felt it would be more meaningful to gain some experience through a pilgrimage.

This three-month period between the examination and the results is always filled with uncertainty. It is a time of indecision, during which students' minds often wander in different directions. One line of thought is that, if they pass with good marks, they will gain admission to a respected college where they can engage with thoughtful ideas and

capable teachers. At the same time, another possibility troubles them. If, due to poor results or financial constraints, they do not secure a place in a reputable college, then they will have to enrol in an average institution, provided they pass at all.

However, whether the college is prestigious or not, and whether the teachers are excellent or merely adequate, the university remains the same and so does the syllabus. In that case, why should a student of an average college feel inferior? Teachers guide students in the classroom, but real study often takes place at home. True learning lies somewhere between formal instruction and self-study.

Another concern that kept surfacing among the four friends was what would happen if two of them passed and two failed. Would the ones who failed abandon their studies or choose to repeat the year? This is how the world works. The same medicine can save a life in one situation and cause harm in another, so it cannot always be called deadly. Even that is not the whole truth.

Putting objects aside and turning to people, one finds all kinds of individuals. Some are honest, others dishonest. Some are emotionally attached, others detached. In such a world, how can one determine whether a day lies between two nights, or a night lies between two days?

No matter how worthless a son or daughter may seem, to parents, they remain the trusted bearers of their legacy. The bonds of affection that one builds become the very foundation for expecting love in return. In any case, what was done could not be

undone. Among the four friends–Kusumlal, Ramakant, Lalit, and Manohar–it was silently understood that two of their families were in no position to afford additional expenses. The other two families, however, were in the habit of taking the entire household on an annual kanwar pilgrimage to Deoghar and managing all related costs.

In the end, the matter came down to this: after carrying the kanwar to Deoghar for forty years, what has happened was inevitable. If that same expense were directed toward a journey to Mathura, Vrindavan, and Haridwar, would it not serve a better purpose? Where ghee is lost, it ends up in the lentils.

Until this point in their lives–the shared school years of Kusumlal, Ramakant, Lalit, and Manohar–the harmony they had built was only growing stronger. So they decided together that they would leave their village on the fourth day. In the meantime, they would gather information about the three pilgrimage sites and make all necessary preparations for the journey. Everything had to be planned, from arranging clothes to organizing food and drink along the way.

After the decision was made, Kusumlal reflected on the uncertainties ahead. If they were to travel to the three sacred places, it was unclear how much time the journey would take. In the meantime, any absence from home would have to be accounted for in some way. With three days still remaining before their departure, they stood face to face with society, which functions in its own way like a school. Many villagers had already visited Mathura, Vrindavan, and Haridwar. At most, it was just a matter of noting who had gone

where.

Mathura and Vrindavan are not far apart. They are so close that they almost seem like one place, just as the body and the head are inseparably joined. Haridwar, on the other hand, lies a little farther away. Still, the route to Haridwar is dotted with many pilgrimage sites that are also worth visiting.

Until now, moral values have continued to guide the daily lives of middle-level farming families in the village. However, with changing times, some families are bound to rise while others decline. As the saying goes, when an old house collapses, a new one rises. That has always been the way of the world.

Everyone knows that when one era ends and another begins, the surface may look unchanged, but life itself shifts completely. This transformation affects everyone, from rulers in their courts to the poorest and most destitute. It is commonly recalled that when the old currency was in use, a beggar would accept a single coin as alms. But once the new currency was introduced, he stopped accepting anything less than ten paise. Similarly, funeral expenses that once cost five paise have now risen to around one and a quarter lakh rupees. That figure has become an average reference point. For some families, it is considered too much, while for others, it is not enough.

At the same time, agriculture, travel, and education have each changed in their own ways. Even so, what exists in its rightful place should be left undisturbed. In that context, Kusumlal, Ramakant, Lalit, and Manohar had no real concern with these broader changes. Their attention was fixed on how best to use

the time between finishing their matriculation exams and receiving their results.

If they kept rereading the same textbooks they had already studied for the exams, a sense of stagnation and self-doubt could set in. On the other hand, if they moved on to next year's textbooks and then ended up failing, they might manage to hide their disappointment outwardly, but inside they would feel as though their efforts had been wasted, like ringing the bell at Mahadev's temple for no result.

All four of them committed themselves fully to the plan. A thought occurred to Kusumlal. His father had willingly agreed to fund his education, and now that he was planning to take a new direction, it was important to ensure his father remained confident in that choice. No matter how generously his father was spending on him, Kusumlal felt the weight of responsibility. After all, a father's wealth–whether from a bank account or a business–is not something a child should automatically claim as his own.

Mangain, which was Kusumlal's father's name, had gone out early in the morning after completing the task of cleaning the courtyard. No matter how much the body may be scorched by the fire of the mind or by the sun and rain, the first joy of bathing–without pouring water over oneself–comes the moment one steps in. In the same way, Mangain's mind had been immersed in a kind of inner cleansing, a mental relief.

Kusumlal said-

"Babu, my friends and I are thinking of going to Mathura, Vrindavan, and Haridwar."

Without much hesitation–or perhaps after quietly

thinking it through–Mangain replied-

"Go with your friends. At the very least, I can say that I will handle the expenses. How many days is the plan for?"

Lightly rubbing his head, Kusumlal said-

"You only come to know how long something will take after you've started it or once you've gone somewhere. I can't say for sure right now."

Whether it was the sincerity in his son's words or simply the affection of a father seeing his child, Mangain said-

"However long it takes, when you do go, make sure you see and understand everything properly. That way, you won't need to go again. The world is vast and full of colourful pilgrimage sites and places of recreation. If you see them even once, regardless of what others say, your heart will tell you that you too have seen the world. What you experience is no less valuable than what I have seen."

Hearing his father's words, Kusumlal's heart was filled with the joy that comes from seeing the results of one's hard work. Silently, he thought that the path had begun to open for him, though other matters still needed to be addressed.

Suddenly, he felt that it was important to meet Ramakant as soon as possible. However, since it was time for bathing and eating, he decided to go in the afternoon.

He reminded himself, not aloud but inwardly, that a task is a task. It is not a joke to be completed just by talking. Every task has its process, and one must move

through it properly.

That afternoon, Kusumlal arrived at Ramakant's house. Ramakant had a particular talent for getting money from his guardian. Sometimes he managed it by sulking, sometimes by insisting, but one way or another, he always found a way to meet his expenses through his guardian.

As soon as he saw Kusumlal, Ramakant laughed from the doorway and said-

"Kusum bhai, our plan is set."

Kusumlal understood that Ramakant must have gained his guardian's approval without much difficulty. He asked-

"Ramakant bhai, has your guardian agreed?"

Ramakant replied-

"Not only has he agreed, but he's also ready to give the money for the expenses."

Kusumlal asked-

"What did you say to your father that convinced him so completely, like Bholababa settling everything in one stroke?"

Ramakant said-

"Brother, I don't understand the magic of this age. You can see for yourself how much business is now done in the name of religion. I told him that every year we carry the kanwar and go to Deoghar, which is just one place. This time, we will visit three sacred places at once. If the cost is greater, then surely the religious merit will also be greater. That alone made him completely happy."

None of the four could tell how the two days in

between had passed. It felt as though they had been absorbed in a task, and time slipped away without notice.

Mangain said to Kusumlal-

“Son, you’re going on a pilgrimage. No one can say how long it will take. Your grandfather is like a ripe mango now. Go on your journey, but if he leaves this world while you are away, then you may find yourself in difficulty.”

Kusumlal understood his father wanted to say. But how such sorrow unfolds in real life is something one only understands by living through it, and he had not yet had that experience. Still, after completing the matriculation examination, even a child’s mind begins to awaken. Kusumlal looked inward and wondered what a person should do at such a moment so that, like the sacred river, pure and clear water might flow within.

For now, he could not yet understand which Ganga this referred to: the one whose bathing ghat is in Simariya or the one whose far shore lies at Maggah.

What can be said of an adult when even an innocent child finds excuses to avoid the truth? Whether truth escapes or turns into a ghost that follows from behind was something Kusumlal still did not fully understand.

When he reached his grandfather, Kusumlal said-

“Baba, we’re thinking of going to the three dhams. We plan to leave tomorrow, so...”

At the word "so," Kusumlal stopped speaking and fell silent.

Baba was eighty-five years old and had spent those years watching the world. Without Kusumlal saying anything more, without another word spoken, Ram Padarath Baba understood what his grandson meant.

Then, with gentleness, he said-

"When you are leaving home on a pilgrimage, you carry no burden of mine. Even if I die while you are away, tell society that Baba died having given his blessing."

Kusumlal now knew there was no objection from Baba. In any case, the entire village had been speaking about the journey to the three dhams. Only Baba's word had remained. So he asked-

"Baba, have you seen the three dhams?"

Baba replied-

"Why wouldn't I have seen them? Am I not part of this world like everyone else?"

Silently, Kusumlal thought to himself that Baba's mind was steady at the moment, so his words would not turn sharp or cutting.

He then asked-

"Baba, what is the significance of the three dhams?"

Baba replied-

"You are going there, so you will see for yourself. For now, let me only say this. In Mathura, you will certainly witness the spectacle of nine months, that is, the cycle of a child's movement in the womb for nine months. Then, when you go from Mathura to Vrindavan, whatever you see there, you will see with

your own eyes. But there is one thing you will surely come to understand: what a gopi is, what gopi love is, and what it became.

You are young, full of strength, and ready to see the world. So go and see it.” ❑

The Ground of the Forefathers

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Hira Kaka had arrived in Bombay five days earlier, but no one from the village, the household, or any relative had come to meet him. Everyone has his own way of thinking and, as a result, his own understanding of things. When understanding begins to form, a person starts to look inward and reflect on himself.

Silently, Hira Kaka thought to himself that the village remains what it has always been. In the village, under the pretext of asking for a bidi or a pinch of tobacco, two or three people gather together and share the joys and sorrows of their lives. Hira Kaka did not have his own independent opinions or individual thoughts.

His son, Sadanand, had come from Bihar to Bombay for a job at the bank. The place where Sadanand lived was not very spacious. Fifty or sixty people were packed into the rooms, and there Hira Kaka sat, quietly observing the spectacle of modern family life unfolding before him.

Sadanand had created a lifestyle for himself in

which he assigned the same importance to his current doorstep in Bombay as villagers do to theirs back home. In Bombay, too, he had managed to recreate the spirit of the village. Just as people sit on the doorstep in the village and talk about birth and death, life and its struggles, and participate in every kind of conversation, here too, people gathered and engaged in discussions in much the same way.

Just as Sadanand received a holiday on Sundays, so did the surrounding offices and factories. It would be difficult to find a village in the surrounding region whose people were not spread across Bombay, Bangalore, or Delhi. People from every village could be found in every major city. In this area alone, more than a hundred individuals had come together to form a cultural and linguistic organisation. Everyone had contributed to building it, and its weekly meetings were held every Sunday from two in the afternoon until ten at night.

During these gatherings, everyone met in one place, showcased their talents and ideas, and shared food and drink. Sadanand had also decided for himself that tvadīyaṁ vastu govindaṁ tubhyameva samarpitam: whatever surplus he earned in Bombay, he would spend in Bombay. According to his belief, if such money were sent back to the soil of Mithila, it would make the land impure. For this reason, he did not hesitate to spend freely on the meetings.

Sadanand refers to his organisation–not only as an ideological group–but also as an intellectual one. He holds a firm belief that when a person develops an open and questioning mind, even a spoken or

conceptual organisation becomes the final resting place of honesty and moral conduct, even if the actions involved remain largely verbal.

Until now, Sadanand had not taken his father, Hira Kaka, anywhere. He believed that his father should first sit with the family, observe, and listen for himself to the differences between the village family structure and the way life operates in the city. Only after this exposure would it make sense to show him more. But such understanding could not come without time.

Today was Sunday. On this day, Hira Kaka would witness how people from rural backgrounds gathered around the Mithila platform, and what kind of platform they had created for themselves in the city.

Early in the morning, Sadanand said to his father-

"Babu, today is Sunday. Our Maithil community is going to gather. So, take your bath and meal early, and rest for a while. From two in the afternoon until ten at night, there won't be a moment to spare."

During the past five days, Hira Kaka had seen a lot. He had learned from what he observed, and at times he had even felt irritation, but he said nothing.

Five minutes before two o'clock, Lakhanlal came by to ask after Hira Kaka. At the same moment, Hira Kaka, tapping his slippers against the floor, was walking from the water tap toward the room. The sound of the door opening reached his ears, but he couldn't identify the voice. After all, this was the city and a market-like environment, not a village courtyard where one walks in without hesitation.

Lakhanlal quietly approached Hira Kaka. Since coming to Bombay, a sweetness had entered his

speech. Smiling, he said-

"Kaka, I touch your feet."

Hira Kaka paused, trying to recognise him. The dried-up figure of village Lakhna had changed so much, grown so healthy and full, that it seemed as though he had been touched by some lush, blooming illness. Seeing Hira Kaka's hesitation, Lakhanlal said again-

"Kaka, I am Lakhanlal."

In the flow of thought and affection, the words slipped out of Hira Kaka's mouth.

"Which Lakhna are you, then?"

Lakhanlal's standard of living had not risen very high, but it had improved somewhat. Along with that, his manner of speech had also changed. Laughing, he replied-

"Kaka, I'm no longer the village Lakhna. Now I am Lakhanlal of Bombay."

Hira Kaka asked-"So, you're earning well, are you?"

Laughing again, Lakhanlal replied-

"Kaka, what can I say? All the hard-earned money has gone into water."

Curious, Hira Kaka asked-

"How did it go into water? And if it has, won't it rot?"

Lakhanlal said-

"Kaka, that's exactly what happened."

Still curious, Hira Kaka continued-

"Why did it turn out like this?"

Lakhanlal replied- "Kaka, you've just come from the tap yourself. Your mind must be cool now. I didn't

have tea at my own place because I always drink the tea made by Sada bhai here. Let's have tea first. These are village stories, like the tale of Rani Saranga. Who knows whether it will take seven days or not to finish them."

Since the rooms were close together, with each person having a small space of his own nearby, Hira Kaka and Lakhanlal's conversation could also be heard by Sadanand. With a gesture of his eyes, Sadanand signalled the person who prepared tea. These days, machines have arrived that can prepare tea or coffee instantly after asking how much sugar one wants.

Looking at Lakhanlal's healthy appearance, Hira Kaka felt satisfied. A thought came to his mind about Santitahi Lal, Lakhanlal's father, whose body had never known even a palmful of flesh. His bones used to shine through his skin. One could practically count every bone just by looking. And now, his son looked so strong and well-built.

Meanwhile, Lakhanlal adjusted his kurta and wrapped a thick shawl around himself.

Tea drinkers, too, fall into two groups: regular and irregular. Regular drinkers are those who are accustomed to drinking tea at fixed times. In the first round of the morning and the first round of the afternoon, they crave a full cup or glass. Later, in the second or third round, they manage with just a small amount. Irregular drinkers, on the other hand, have no fixed routine or pattern.

While sipping his tea, Lakhanlal said-

"Kaka, it's time now, and our talk has been left unfinished."

Showing physical activity, Hira Kaka said- “I’ll drink tea, and I’ll also listen to your thoughts.”

Lakhanlal replied-

“When I first came to Bombay, there was a lot of difficulty back home in the village. That sorrow stayed with me. This is Bombay. Money seems to lie scattered on the streets here, although there are also people who spend their lives sleeping on pavements covered with newspapers. I earned well. My wife also thought we should first build a house in the village. I set aside everything else and poured three years of my earnings into that.”

Lakhanlal’s words pulled Hira Kaka into a sense of praise as the word slipped out of his mouth.

“Waah.”

But Lakhanlal felt hurt by the ‘waah.’ With a wounded heart, he said- “Kaka, those three years of earnings went to waste. Since the day the house was built, I haven’t gone back to the village even once, nor have I stayed there for a single day. The house stands locked, and here we are, living in a rented place.”

Suddenly, the wheel of thought began turning in Hira Kaka’s mind. A realisation emerged. In today’s world, there are people like this too, who haven’t yet understood the balance between their lifestyle and their income. The essence of life is to give it a steady direction. On one side, using a lack of capital as an excuse, they do not expand any work of their own. On the other side, they lock away the capital they already have.

Just as Hira Kaka was stepping out of the room, Kishunlal arrived at the doorway. He greeted him with-

"Kaka, I touch your feet."

Back in the village, Hira Kaka had never seen Kishunlal dressed like this: in a shirt and trousers. The sight took him by surprise. Kishunlal, too, had not returned to the village in the past year and a half.

Sensing the hesitation in Hira Kaka's blessing, Kishunlal repeated himself.

"Kaka, I'm Kishunlal. You've grown older now. That's probably why you're finding it hard to recognise me."

Recognising the clarity in his words, Hira Kaka steadied himself and replied-

"Kishunlal, the wish I've had since childhood to see Bombay has finally been fulfilled today."

Just as a person's heart brightens after receiving something sweet, Hira Kaka's heart too had grown fresh and joyful.

Kishunlal said-

"You didn't tell me what your wish was, and now you say it has been fulfilled."

Releasing the thoughts that had long gathered in his mind, Hira Kaka replied-

"Kishunlal, ever since I became a little aware of the world and saw an aeroplane flying in the sky, a thought settled in my mind. I kept wondering when the day would come when I would get to board one myself. That wish has now been fulfilled."

Kishunlal asked- "Kaka, is there any other desire still left, or has everything been fulfilled now?"

Holding on to the honesty of his belief, Hira Kaka said- "I've come from the village to Bombay. For now,

that much has been said. What comes next is meant for what lies ahead."

Kishunlal said-

"What is that?"

Hira Kaka replied-

"The day I wished to board an aeroplane, from that same day, I also carried with me other desires connected to Bombay. Now that I've come here, shouldn't I try to fulfil them too?"

Kishunlal said-

"Many people have already reached the meeting. So, while the tea is being poured, go ahead and finish your thoughts."

Hira Kaka himself felt that a thought remains incomplete unless it is spoken. So it would be better to express it.

He said-

"When I was young, back when I was in school, I had one particular wish. I had watched the film Samaj Ko Badal Dalo, with Ajay Sahni in the lead role. From that moment on, the thought stayed with me that when I came to Bombay, I would try to see Ajay Sahni in person."

Given the kind of person Kishunlal had become, this didn't seem impossible to him at all. He asked-

"Anything else?"

Hira Kaka said-

"There's one more."

Encouraging him to continue, Kishunlal said-

"Speak quickly. Time is passing. Many people must

be waiting."

Hira Kaka said- "Kishun, the words I once heard from Raj Kapoor's mouth while watching a film still echo in my mind, just as clearly as they did back then: 'Ai bhai, zara dekh ke chalo. Aage hi nahin, peechhe bhi. Daayen hi nahin, baayen bhi. Upar hi nahin, neeche bhi.' From that moment, I had the desire to see Raj Kapoor's face. But now he is no longer with us, so at the very least, it would still be something to see the faces of his family."

Kishunlal replied-

"Kaka, I keep track of everything in Bombay. I've already told Sada bhai that I will take full responsibility for this."

Hearing Kishunlal's words, a feeling awakened in Hira Kaka's mind: wherever one settles, that land begins to feel beautiful.

After walking a few steps with Kishunlal, Hira Kaka saw Mithila revealing itself in its own unique way. There was no formal assembly, no official proposal, no stage, and no event organisers. What existed was the Mithila platform itself, where fifty kinds of conversations were unfolding at once. Someone was arranging a job, someone else was working on a marriage alliance. One person was singing the twelve-month song of the mango grove, and another was displaying Mithila paintings.

Those who came to meet Hira Kaka felt a sense of comfort. Everyone asked the same question- "Kaka, how are things in the village?"

Hira Kaka gave the same reply to each of them- "Everything is fine."

As the night moved past nine o’clock, Hira Kaka, having sat continuously for hours, began to feel short of breath. Rising from his seat, he said to Sadanand-

“Son, you have kept the lineage of the elders alive.”

Mantu, Sadanand’s son, was sitting beside him. When he heard his father speak of “the lineage of the elders,” he turned and asked-

“What is the lineage of the elders, Baba?”

Hearing his son’s question, Sadanand replied-

“Son, Baba won’t answer you. I will. Listen calmly in the morning.”

He said this aloud, but deep inside, a wave of unease passed through him. He knew that the lineage of fathers and forefathers, which had continued until now, was being slowly destroyed for countless reasons. Only fragments remained, and even those now stood at the edge of disappearance. ❑

On the Dice

☰

This story may be taken as symbolic, like the dice game of the Mahabharata, or it may not be seen that way. If life itself is understood as a game of dice, then the presence of dice is natural, so why shouldn't the comparison be accepted? But when dice are viewed only in terms of money, wealth, and property, then the comparison loses meaning and is better left aside.

The dice of the Mahabharata are mythical, and since they belong to the Puranic world, both the game and the dice have changed their appearance, meaning, and role over time. They have gradually become faded and colourless. Even so, such changes are part of life. A person's face may change again and again, until even the soul is forced to admit that the person can no longer be recognised. But does that mean truth has turned into falsehood? However widely cricket may spread across the world, does it mean our own traditional games like gulli-danda, tied to field and forest, will vanish?

The Mahabharata is a Purana, an ancient text. So take it as an old idea and set it aside for now. But the dice game of Pachisi, played on the night of Kojagara,

must be acknowledged. Lord Mahadev and Parvati themselves are believed to sit and play Pachisi throughout the night of Kojagara.

Let us not now go into a discussion about the time from the new moon of the bright fortnight of the month of Asin up to the full moon night of Kojagara.

Ravikant Babu is a high school teacher. While teaching an eleventh-grade class, he said to his students-

“Life is a gamble, and the one who sits down to play it is a gambler, someone who turns life into a matter of loss and gain.”

There were more than sixty students in Ravikant Babu’s classroom. Just as there were over sixty students, there were more than sixty distinct ways of thinking and understanding. That also meant more than one hundred and twenty eyes and ears were watching and listening. When sixty minds move in sixty directions, sixty different paths are formed. Even if, later on, all those paths are brought together and straightened into one, like the fibres and tissues that make up the body’s cells.

Bhukhan and Dukhan, seated together on the third bench of the classroom, also heard the words spoken by Ravikant Babu. They were village boys from Mithila, already somewhat constrained in their thinking due to the influence of economic conditions and social structures. What Ravikant Babu had said was not fully understood by either of them. However, the words "dice of gambling" were familiar: terms that circulated widely in village life. Even vegetable sellers and buyers, going from courtyard to courtyard with their trade,

often remarked, morning and evening, that in this wave of inflation, they had lost the gamble. In other words, the small trader had once again been overtaken by the larger one.

After class was dismissed, Bhukhan glanced at Dukhan, and at the same moment, Dukhan was already turning to look at Bhukhan. Their eyes met. As soon as this happened, both stepped forward and came together. There was curiosity in both their minds, and they were eager to speak. But at that moment, an unspoken thought arose in each of them: first, one should listen, then speak. That is, it is better to hear the other's view before expressing one's own.

Bhukhan said-

"Dukhan, I couldn't quite understand the idea that Master Sahib, meaning Ravikant Babu, was talking about. A thought keeps rising in my mind that I should try to understand it again."

Just as some illnesses spread from children and gradually reach the whole neighbourhood, Dukhan replied- "I also didn't understand it properly. But if you're going to ask him, then I'll come with you."

Bhukhan's eagerness increased even more. Encouraged, he said- "The school has closed. Master Sahib must be heading home now. It would be best if we catch him on the way and, while walking with him, understand the matter properly before he reaches his house."

After school was dismissed, the two boys kept lifting their eyes and scanning the crowd of students, searching for Ravikant Babu.

Ravikant Babu followed a personal rule. He never

left school until all the students had exited the compound. True to his habit, he was walking behind. Bhukhan and Dukhan had begun looking for him at the front, among the crowd of students, but did not spot him. In the meantime, all the students moved ahead. When the two boys turned back to their original spot, they saw Ravikant Babu stepping down from the school veranda.

At the sight of Ravikant Babu, both of their hearts contracted slightly. As he walked forward, it felt as if they were counting his every step, their eyes fixed on his movements.

On the other side, Ravikant Babu also encountered Bhukhan and Dukhan on the road between the school and his home, much like the way Kabir once met Ramanand on the steps of the pond in Kashi. Just as the greatness of an elder lies in lowering one's own head so that the heads of others may rise, Ravikant Babu, upon seeing the unfamiliar students, silently measured them in that moment with the same attentiveness he applied to the four hundred students under his care.

With his head slightly lowered, Ravikant Babu was walking home. After going a short distance, he noticed Bhukhan and Dukhan standing on the road. At first glance, he thought something might have happened. That they were standing there meant there must be a reason. If it had been anything serious, it would have involved an argument, harsh words, or perhaps even pushing and shoving. But none of that was present.

When Ravikant Babu came face to face with the two boys, he glanced at them, then lowered his eyes

again and continued walking, crossing the spot where they were standing. At that moment, Bhukhan, respectfully and within his limits, said-

"Sir, with you..."

Raising his eyes to look at Bhukhan's face, Ravikant Babu asked-

"With me what?"

Bhukhan replied-

"What you taught today in the eleventh class..."

Ravikant Babu was a spiritually inclined man, and he understood the value of a pause between tasks. The moment of transition between two activities serves as a kind of release from effort. In the local tradition, there is a Vedic saying that one should understand another's heart by reflecting on one's own. With this in mind, Ravikant Babu said-

"Son, from half past ten to half past four, there has been a great deal of exertion, which you have seen. I am hungry now. Let me first eat something and drink a cup of tea. After that, I will think about your question."

In saying this, Ravikant Babu was also measuring his own thoughts. He was quietly assessing what should be the priority when a student comes forward with curiosity and a desire to understand.

Hearing his words, a sense of assurance arose in the minds of both Bhukhan and Dukhan. They felt confident that Master Sahib would understand their question. That assurance gave rise to respect.

However, Ravikant Babu kept another thought to himself. He was quietly considering which child had the

maturity and initiative to seek understanding, and what kind of support and care existed for that child at home. He knew that only by sitting with them, eating and drinking together, could he help them reach a place of understanding.

Without saying anything more, Ravikant Babu continued walking, and Bhukhan and Dukhan followed him until they reached his home.

Sudha, the wife of Ravikant Babu, was familiar with the timing of her husband's return from school. She had arranged her daily tasks accordingly. As on other days, Ravikant Babu returned home, washed his hands and feet, and then settled into his usual space. Guiding Bhukhan and Dukhan inside, he said-

“Sons, there is no difference between teacher and student. The student is the teacher, and the teacher is also a student. In earlier times, during the stage of brahmacharya, both teacher and students would earn together, cook with their own hands, eat together, and engage in dialogue while seated side by side.”

After a brief pause, he added-

“First, go and wash your hands and feet at the tap. Come back clean. Then we will all sit together, eat and drink, and I will also answer your questions.”

Suddenly, a spark lit up in the minds of Bhukhan and Dukhan. What flashed was the thought that in a society where certain groups had long been excluded from education, learning, and literacy, how could the light of knowledge ever reach everyone? To Ravikant Babu, both boys appeared as students on the path of genuine learning. They walked to the tap, washed their hands and feet, and silently hoped that Master Sahib

would share his food with them and eat alongside them.

Their minds still held the simplicity of childhood, filled with innocent hope. Before they returned from the tap, Sudha had already brought and arranged the water and food.

After tea and refreshments, Ravikant Babu, Bhukhan, and Dukhan sat together in a triangular arrangement. Ravikant Babu said-

“Now, tell me what difficulty you are facing.”

Although the two boys shared the same question, there remained a gap between their ways of thinking. It would have been better if their thoughts could have merged. But that was not possible at the moment, for Master Sahib was sitting between them. Bhukhan said-

“Sir, in the third period, during your lesson for the eleventh class, you said that ‘life is a gamble, and the gambler who plays it has set up a game of loss and gain.’ That idea is a little…”

Saying “a little,” Bhukhan hesitated, intending to shorten his words and move ahead. But Ravikant Babu, seasoned by experience, understood the situation the way a physician reads a pulse to detect illness. He reflected quietly. People often say that garlic and onion are siblings, but in practice, the sameness between two things may not be real. One might live behind a thin wall of a hut, while the other is scattered in fragments, surviving alone in plastic shelters. In such a case, how could one truthfully call them the same?

Like a triangle, Ravikant Babu approached the question with care. One point was the mystery of the idea itself, the second was the process of explanation

and understanding, and the third was the one who had not yet grasped it.

Just as an experienced person gathers the moments of life and binds them within the limits of time, Ravikant Babu too had learned to collect his experiences and move forward in step with time. He said-

“Sons, first tell me this: how do you want to shape the question you have raised?”

As he spoke, he continued for a while, but then reflected that perhaps he had spoken more than was necessary, considering the age of the two boys. In any case, it is often seen that children of the same age, even those born on the same day, can differ greatly in their levels of maturity, each showing different shades of understanding.

Collecting his thoughts, Ravikant Babu said-

“Sons, open your ears and listen carefully. Just as life is a gamble and the person who plays it is a gambler, understand this too: for a gambler, the gamble is indeed a gamble, but for a player, it is also a game.”

On hearing the words “gamble” and “game,” Bhukhan’s mind wavered slightly, and Dukhan’s mind did too. How could it not? On one side, people say that in gambling a person may lose even his wife. On the other, for the sportsman, it remains a game.

Ravikant Babu was silently observing both of them, trying to grasp the rhythm of their thoughts, their pace, and their way of understanding. As he spoke of the idea of a player’s game, the curiosity in both Bhukhan and Dukhan became sharper.

The world around them had already become such that everyone seemed to be sitting on a dice-board of play, entering the field as if representing some distant, unfamiliar country. In this context, it could be said that people today have started to think and act on a global level. From here onward, it remains to be seen how far people of the twenty-first century may still advance.

Dukhan said- “Sir, my mind has become tangled and confused. I think I will understand better another day.”

Hearing Dukhan’s words, Ravikant Babu felt a shift within himself. He realised that, despite their age, Bhukhan and Dukhan should not be seen merely as innocent children. A moment later, he reminded himself of his role. He was a teacher, and his life, too, moved forward on a teacher’s modest salary. If, by holding the hand of a child who has fallen behind, he could help that child move even a little forward, was that not an act of humanity?

Extending the bond, Ravikant Babu said-

“Sons, during school hours we are in school, and at other times we are at home. So whenever you feel the need to understand something or ask a question, do not hesitate. Come and ask freely, and understand whatever you wish to.”

Hearing these words, just as Bhukhan had, Dukhan too felt a light awaken in his mind. Dukhan said-

“Sir, we want to understand a little more deeply, from the roots.”

On hearing the word “roots,” something stirred in Ravikant Babu’s mind. A thought rose within him: this

world is full of dualities. He said-

“Sons, you yourselves can see that there is day and there is night. There is sorrow and there is happiness. There is man and there is woman. There are gods and there are goddesses. In the same way, there is fire and there is water. There is earth and there is sky. How much more should I go on?”

Both Bhukhan and Dukhan responded together-

“Yes, that is true.”

As they spoke, time moved ahead. Noticing the hour, Ravikant Babu said-

“Go for today. Come again tomorrow. Meeting both of you has lightened my heart.”

In the minds of both Bhukhan and Dukhan, memories and teachings from their fathers began to rise: advice about how to dress, how to sit alone, how to sit among people, and so on. All of these thoughts now came together at once. ❑

Circulation

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Like other villages in Mithila, Raghopur also hosts the Bhagwat Katha every year at the Brahmasthan, as well as in five different village households. Unlike festivals or birth ceremonies, the Bhagwat Katha does not follow a fixed date or month. However, the Katha at the Brahmasthan, though not tied to exact calendar days, has become a tradition with an almost fixed schedule. Every year, it begins on the morning of Kartik Purnima and concludes on Amavasya of Agahan, the fifteenth day.

The five Kathas held in private homes do not follow any such pattern. Among them, the Katha at Munilal Kaka's house is organised after carefully observing the situation and timing. He chooses a period when no other Katha is scheduled in the village, and when there is no major festival or event involving death or mourning. The remaining four, however, are often marked by rivalry.

This rivalry is particularly evident between Yashodhar Kaka and Kishunlal. Whenever Yashodhar Kaka thinks of organising a Bhagwat Katha, Kishunlal seems to decide on the same. Though both men belong to the same caste, there is no mutual harmony

between them. This disharmony is not displayed openly in public, but it is deeply rooted within them.

After all, it is often observed that jackfruit grows on a mango tree and banyan figs appear on a jackfruit tree. What is one to make of that? Look at religion itself. It is meant to inspire fearlessness and awaken inner strength in a human being. Yet in reality, it seems to have become nothing more than a word repeated in conversation.

In any case, Yashodhar Kaka and Kishunlal continue to organise their own Bhagwat Kathas with the support of their families and kin. As for the rest of the villagers, they remain largely indifferent to these rivalries.

At another place in the village, specifically at Ramadhar Bhai's house, the day and time for starting the Bhagwat Katha are already fixed. On that very same day, Manohar Bhai also begins his own Katha. Many times, villagers have tried to convince all four organisers that such overlapping events harm the social fabric, but none of them is willing to listen. No one is ready to sacrifice anything that he considers his own.

The rivalry between Yashodhar Kaka and Kishunlal is not rooted in caste but in differences of lineage. On the other hand, the conflict between Ramadhar Bhai and Manohar Bhai is not based on lineage but on caste. Both consider themselves leaders of their respective communities and have linked their caste identities to the hosting of the Bhagwat Katha.

Yet one thing is clearly lacking for both pairs: income. None of them organises the Katha as a public

event. Instead, each does it privately. However, from the Katha stage, the names of donors and contributors are publicly announced. These announcements themselves create a competitive atmosphere that encourages further donations. All four–Yashodhar Kaka, Kishunlal, Ramadhar Bhai, and Manohar Bhai–are fully aware of what they are doing.

In contrast stands Munilal Kaka, a man of independent temperament in the village. Independent in the sense that, like Kabir Das's words-

"no friendship with anyone, no enmity with anyone" -he follows a single mantra, repeating it much like villagers chant sacred phrases-

"Money is religion, money is action, money is happiness. Therefore, O money, you are also the path to liberation."

The social environment too has slowly come to reflect this way of thinking. However, Munilal Kaka's personal beliefs and lifestyle remain different. He lives by the principle that love itself is God and the Supreme Being. He takes a personal vow to organise the Bhagwat Katha on his own. If someone from the village offers help, he accepts it only on one condition: there must be no public announcements over the microphone at the Katha.

Where there should be devotional songs and spiritual recitations, announcements of donations and names on subscription lists go on throughout the day. But Munilal Kaka is fearless and outspoken. He responds to this openly, saying clearly- "Brother, if larger offerings truly bring greater religious merit, then what need is there to announce them all day over

loudspeakers?”

The third young man of Raghopur, and also the third graduate, is Mohan. After completing his BA, Mohan has been living in the village for the past two years. Until now, his life had been spent in hostels, so he remained mostly detached from village affairs.

After completing his BA, Mohan had been living in the village for two years. Over the past year, as he settled into village life, the hopes his father, Hiralal, had once held began to fade. The same uncertainty began to stir in Mohan's own mind. He belonged to a new generation, one that understood life by its own standards. Everyone knows that the same mouth which laughs can also cry. The same ears that hear words of religion also hear words that contradict it. The same eyes that shed tears of sorrow also release tears of joy. This is how the world works, and such is the nature of life.

Mohan, as a young man, divided time into two parts: one for the days already gone, and another for the days still to come. He placed himself in the middle, standing at the point of transition, and began to reflect that life should not be lived only for oneself, but with thought for others as well. He reached the edge of a boundary in one direction, but then paused and turned back. Just as it seemed right to reflect on the past, it also became necessary to consider the future. A thought formed in his mind: the life lived from birth until now stands before us today. The future, too, will emerge from today. By its nature, the future remains unwritten, waiting to take shape through our actions.

In the same way that a person, lost in a dense

forest or tangled thoughts, searches for a path, no one ever walks willingly toward death, saying- “Let me embrace it.” People always seek life and the act of living. Therefore, those elements of the past that have become irrelevant or unhelpful should be left behind. What remains useful must be adapted and coloured by the needs and conditions of the present. As for the future, it deserves thought and planning, for life must be lived from beginning to end, from birth to death. Some life journeys are such that the story of one individual becomes intertwined with the lives of many others.

Suddenly, the idea of starting a new life arose in Mohan’s mind. But as quickly as it came, his thoughts turned back once more. Looking inward, he found that the teachings of learned individuals began to echo in his mind. A rush of thoughts stirred, shaped by his education and the subjects he had studied. The world is vast, and so are the thoughts that live within it. Each person sees life through their own lens, shaped by their own path.

Did not Rama himself once praise the heron, saying- “Look, Lakshman, the heron at Lake Pampā is truly righteous.

It walks slowly and carefully, out of concern for harming any living creature.”

But hearing this, did not a fish protest- “Why is the heron praised, Rama, when I have been destroyed by it?

One should judge a companion’s character by living alongside them.”

From the vast storehouse of the past, a thought

began to stir in Mohan's mind: that a human being is the maker of his own destiny. As this thought took hold, Mohan's sense of resolve awakened as well. His life, which until then had followed a certain course, began to change direction. But what kind of change was this? He moved away from thinking only of himself and toward a deeper understanding of balance and equality.

After a year had passed, Mohan began to study and reflect on village life. A village is a world of its own, containing everything. There is no shortage of good, and no shortage of bad either. More than that, within what is good, there is something even better, and within what is bad, something worse. And the boundaries are not always clear. Sometimes, the good can turn bad, and the bad can turn good. Just as it is hard to trace a person's ancestry, it is equally hard to trace the roots of a tree or a field. Even a single mango tree, if one tries to track its origin, cannot be traced simply to one or two sources. One must look at the branches that spread outward and sideways. What does that mean?

Take, for example, a variety of mango called Krishnabhog. A tree can grow from its seed, or it can be grown by grafting a branch onto another tree. There is a difference between the two. A grafted tree produces the same kind of fruit as the tree it came from. But a tree grown from a seed does not always produce the same fruit. The characteristics keep changing. If one tries to trace the lineage of trees grown from seeds, there is no clear end. So it is better to leave that aside.

From this vast and layered reality of the village,

Mohan turned his attention to the Bhagwat Katha. Inquiry can stretch infinitely, but Mohan decided to begin with two questions. The first was: how long has the Bhagwat Katha been held in the village? The second was: in which places is it held?

One challenge is that the memory of people who have not had formal education is often limited. Another is that the village still remains a village, where the number of uneducated people is quite high. Here, being uneducated does not simply mean not knowing how to read or write. Whether one is a farmer, a small trader, or someone with another livelihood, everyone is occupied with the demands of everyday life and the concerns of tomorrow.

It is also worth noting that Mohan himself is not an experienced researcher. Still, if one were to honestly measure the time he has spent running from meeting to meeting, it is clear that he has made progress toward his goal. Including the Bhagwat Katha held at the Brahmasthan, there are six such events in the village. The one at the Brahmasthan has already taken place this year. The remaining five are scheduled to be held at different places within the community.

Mohan quietly resolved that, since the Bhagwat Katha at the Brahmasthan had already taken place, he would make sure to attend the remaining five Kathas that were yet to be held within the village community. However, as soon as the thought of participating crossed his mind, Mohan reflected on how these events had unfolded in the past. The Katha at the Brahmasthan is conducted collectively, with the involvement of the entire village. But among the

household Kathas, only the one held at Munilal Kaka's home was conducted with sincerity and honesty. At the other four places, caste pride and the arrogance of wealth had overtaken the spirit of devotion. For this reason, Mohan decided he would not participate in those events. This was not merely a personal decision but a question for the entire society. The responsibility of creating balance in society rests with the society itself.

Another thought also began to rise in Mohan's mind. In our society, will religious rituals always remain the domain of those regarded as great devotees, while others are left on the outside? It is just like a broken or muddy path. If the path is only slightly damaged, people still manage to cross by jumping over it. But where the current is strong or a deep crack has formed, no one can manage alone. In such cases, help from others becomes necessary.

With this in mind, Mohan decided to offer his participation in the Bhagwat Katha at Munilal Kaka's home. He went to meet him. Munilal Kaka, who lived with a simplicity free of possessions and worries, was sitting on his doorstep, quietly observing the daily rhythm of the village. Just then, Mohan arrived and greeted him, saying-

"Kaka, I touch your feet. Are you at ease?"

By asking "are you at ease," Mohan intended to signal that he had come with a deeper thought, not just for a casual greeting. Usually, people exchange simple pleasantries on the street. Calm and composed, Munilal Kaka replied-

"It is the restless one who creates trouble. Why

would I not be at ease?”

Hearing these words, Mohan felt slightly unsettled. A doubt crossed his mind: was Munilal Kaka being sharp-tongued, or was he making a subtle remark? But quickly collecting himself, Mohan said-

“Kaka, when are you thinking of organising the Bhagwat?”

As he spoke, Mohan remembered that Munilal Kaka always did things according to his own understanding. He never fixed a particular month or date in advance. When the time seemed right, he would go ahead. Munilal Kaka replied-

“Son Mohan, not everything happens just by one’s own wish. One can make all the preparations, but if the person who recites the Katha is not available, then how can it take place?”

This thought from Munilal Kaka took root in Mohan’s own mind as well. After all, the mind is always active, constantly shifting between the conscious and the unconscious, between the body and the soul.

Mohan asked-

“Kaka, who is the Bhagwat reciter?”

Munilal Kaka replied-

“There are many storytellers in the village, but no one is as honest as Triloki Bhai. That is why every year we invite him to conduct the Katha.”

Carrying this new thought in his mind, Mohan said-

“I’ll go now.”

From Munilal Kaka’s home, Mohan went straight to Triloki Kaka’s house. Triloki Kaka, with his distinct

perspective, often reflects deeply on the life and mindset of the village. Though they lived in the same village, Triloki Kaka only recognised Mohan by face. Until now, they had never spoken directly.

There was a reason for this distance. Triloki Kaka, though educated, is known for his scholarship in Sanskrit, while Mohan sees himself as modern in outlook. The two stood somewhat apart in their ways of thinking. Such differences have become common even within families. A celibate student from a Sanskrit school and a student of St Xavier's, even if they are real brothers, can be found growing apart in conduct, speech, and manner.

As soon as Mohan arrived at Triloki Kaka's home, Triloki Kaka called out from a distance-

"Mohan, come in, come in."

Before Mohan could complete his greeting and bow in respect, Triloki Kaka said again-

"Everything is in motion. That is the nature of the world."

Whether Mohan had forgotten to offer his greeting or simply missed the moment, only he knew. Still, he asked-

"How so?"

Triloki Kaka replied-

"Just as the Gita moved and became the Bhagwat. In that same way." ❑

The Miser

☰

In the village of Kisānpur, this year marks the thirtieth Durga Puja. On the day of Bhado Amavasya, when kusha grass is uprooted and ritual specialists enter the kusha grove, the thought of Durga Puja begins to take shape in people's minds. When a collective resolve forms within a community, it naturally moves toward fulfilling it. Since the village is preparing for Durga Puja, from that moment onward, people begin adjusting their lives and routines so that, on the day of the yatra, they can celebrate the victory of Mother Jagadamba with joy and devotion.

A village is, after all, a village: a place where, just as grains of every kind grow, so do fruits, flowers, and human beings of every kind. With such diversity all around, people too are shaped by it. When people of all sorts live together, society becomes multicoloured. And just as physical ailments like gastric problems and diabetes have spread to everyone, ailments of the mind have also taken root. What is the name of that ailment? You already know it from experience, but since it does not rise easily to the tongue, you do not speak of it. The ailment is emotion.

Most people suffer from it. There are two kinds of emotion that afflict society. One is the emotion of inferiority, and the other is the emotion of arrogance. Both create boundaries and distance between individuals and groups. What is stranger still is that the same mouth and ears, which express humility in one setting, can turn proud and boastful in another.

In village households, one often sees that during a daughter's marriage, the same person bows before society, saying that a daughter is society's wealth, and that honour and shame both belong to the community. Yet that very person becomes grand and self-important when arranging a son's marriage, as if trying to surpass all previous examples. To 'break previous records' here means that the scale and reach of dowry, already widespread in village marriages, is not merely repeated but expanded further in the desire to go beyond what has been done before.

Just as villagers and outsiders each view a village through their own lens, Sonelal Kaka too saw his own village–and others–through his personal perspective. As the month of Asin began, he did not feel any anger toward the village, meaning the villagers. There were two reasons for this absence of anger.

The first reason was that it is not appropriate to involve the new generation–those currently studying for matriculation or those who have recently completed their exams–in social work during this time. Their present stage in life is meant for study. If they are pulled into month-long social activities, then that entire month of reading and writing will be lost. That would not be right.

The second reason for his lack of anger was not due to the fact that this year's Durga Puja was being organized with three times the expenditure of previous years. Nor was it because a third of the budget was being spent on a courtesan's dance. He felt no particular disturbance about whether it was appropriate for such a performance to take place during a community Puja. After all, that was the custom in the courts of kings, where courtesans performed for royalty.

Even then, Sonelal Kaka's mind did not dwell on what the word courtesan truly means. A courtesan–someone skilled in singing, dancing, and the performing arts–if brought to a public stage in society, deserves to be welcomed. However, the meaning that society has attached to the word has become distorted. It is this distortion that has given rise to discomfort, more than the presence of the courtesan herself.

In any case, what exists in its place should remain there. As in previous years, Sonelal Kaka made his contribution to the Puja, but he chose to boycott the courtesan's performance. Because of this, he did not visit the Durga shrine even once for darshan. Once the thought of going for darshan left his mind, he had no desire to see or hear anything from the fair either.

The immersion of the Durga idol was carried out with great pomp and celebration. Afterwards, the village turned its attention to its own internal accounting. People began discussing how many new faces–sons-in-law, daughters-in-law, and guests–had come to the village. Were there fewer than last year, or more? Compared to the previous year, twice as many

guests had arrived, and donations as well as income from outside the village had more than doubled. Up to this point, everything had taken place peacefully.

When the village Puja committee began its accounting of donations, Madhav suddenly made a remark about Sonelal Kaka's contribution. He said-

"Sonelal Kaka is stingy. That's why he didn't increase his donation, even though everyone else did." Panchanand supported him by nodding in agreement.

The new Puja committee had been formed by removing the older, previous members. In this new committee, more than half the members were educated students still pursuing their studies. Madhav and Panchanand were both among them.

What had been said in the committee soon reached the ears of others. It passed from person to person until eventually it reached Sonelal Kaka himself. When he first heard that people were calling him stingy, not even a trace of anger rose within him. He was used to hearing all sorts of things spoken by others. His anger came only later, when he began to reflect on what it meant for him to be seen as stingy in the eyes of society. That thought struck a deeper chord. The anger that took root then still smoulders in his mind, and because of it, both Madhav and Panchanand remain firmly lodged in his thoughts. He is determined to show them just how petty and offensive it is to label someone as stingy.

By chance, near the path by the pond's steps, Madhav and Panchanand were walking from north to south, while Sonelal Kaka was coming from the opposite direction, from south to north. As the three

approached one another, their eyes met. In that moment, Sonelal Kaka's gaze sharpened with a Narasimha-like intensity, while the expressions of Madhav and Panchanand softened noticeably. The reasons behind these opposing responses were different for each of them: different for Sonelal Kaka, and different for the two younger men.

In the village, Sonelal Kaka is regarded as a person without alignment. This means that most people see him as someone who follows his own mind, someone stubborn and firm in his word, and they accept him as such. The idea of being unaligned has two aspects. The first is not hiding one's path in life: neither one's ideas nor one's actions. The second is keeping both life and work open and visible. Sonelal Kaka is considered just such a person. His thoughts and his work speak for themselves.

After the immersion of the idol, both the visibility and social standing of Madhav and Panchanand rose noticeably in the village. This rise was largely due to their involvement in the formation of the Puja committee and the way the work had been carried out. In reality, there had been no significant change in the method of organizing things. But when donations increased, there was no reason for anyone to raise objections. Without resistance, work becomes smoother by nature. Obstacles tend to arise only when someone challenges adverse circumstances and takes initiative.

Sonelal Kaka is one such unaligned figure in the village. He reshapes traditions, reinterpreting inherited customs and actions in light of present-day realities.

For this reason, some in the village even consider him a rebellious person.

Previously, Madhav and Panchanand had been seen merely as ordinary high school students. But after the festival, as they became involved in public activities, they began to be recognised as social workers, and their reputation grew within the community. During a meeting of the Puja committee, Madhav had openly called Sonelal Kaka stingy. Later, when word of this spread and people began discussing it, several villagers explained to Madhav that such a comment about Sonelal Kaka was improper.

So when Madhav encountered Sonelal Kaka again, he became uneasy the moment their eyes met. For his part, Sonelal Kaka had many thoughts rising within him–thoughts of different shades–but considering Madhav's youth, and the fact that he was still a high school student, he chose to suppress them all.

Sonelal Kaka asked-

"Son, which class are you in?"

Madhav replied-

"In the eleventh."

Sonelal Kaka continued-

"How many days are left before your board exams?"

Madhav said-

"His ended today is seventeenth November and from the fifteenth of February, the board exams will begin."

Sonelal Kaka asked again-

"How much time do you have in between?"

Madhav paused, trying to calculate silently. As he faltered, he began counting on his fingers and said-

"About three months, more or less."

Seeing Madhav struggle with the calculation, Sonelal Kaka understood what kind of student he was. Even so, he kept his thoughts carefully restrained and offered a suggestion, knowing full well that people make their own rules. What is good and what is bad is another matter altogether.

Sonelal Kaka asked-

"Do you study grammar as well?"

At the mention of the word grammar, Madhav's mind tensed. With some stiffness, he replied-

"All kinds of grammar: English grammar, Hindi grammar, Sanskrit grammar, and even Maithili grammar."

Sonelal Kaka said-

"Then explain the meaning of the word kanjoos."

At that, fear rose in the minds of both Madhav and Panchanand. A tremor ran through their bodies. The word kanjoos now weighed heavily on them, and because of that weight, even its pronunciation faltered. It was as if a note in classical music wavered on the singer's tongue just before reaching its pitch. In the same way, Madhav stumbled even while trying to utter the syllable ka.

Silently, Sonelal Kaka assessed Madhav. He reflected on the fact that they were all born into a village where, from the time of their earliest ancestors until now, more than half the people had remained uneducated and inexperienced. In such a place, how

much could one really hope for?

Like water left out overnight in the cold month of Magh, Sonelal Kaka's mind gradually settled and became still. His thoughts stopped rising and falling. At one moment, he felt that Madhav's careless remark during the donation collection–calling him a miser–should simply be ignored. In the next moment, he thought that this was a child of society, and nurturing social responsibility in him was important. Right after that, another thought arose: such an innocent child should not be taught to use a word like kanjoos, a word that has been passed from mouth to mouth, like stones and pebbles that must be sifted out before pouring grain into a clean vessel.

Suddenly, Sonelal Kaka's mind began to leap about, like a fish flapping on a weighing scale, or like popped maize crackling in a clay pan. In that moment of inner movement, Sonelal Kaka spoke-

"Son, the word kanjoos has no fixed, face-to-face meaning. Whatever someone feels like saying, whatever comes to their lips, is what gets spoken. So stop getting caught in other people's words. Instead, accept the rhythm of your own life's cycle."

As he spoke, Sonelal Kaka immediately became aware that the one he was addressing was still a child below matriculation level. During this pause, Madhav remained silent, but Panchanand suddenly spoke up-

"What cycle of movement?"

Just as in a pot of khichdi placed on the stove, sometimes the rice rises to the surface and sometimes the lentils, in the same way, Sonelal Kaka's thoughts began to rise and sink once more. He said- "Son, we'll

talk about the cycle of life another time. First, listen to how the word miser has moved and fallen over time. You'll find people who drink toddy and liquor like ascetics, who neglect the basic needs of their families–salt and oil, even–and who spend more on alcohol than they earn. They lie sprawled by the roadside, cursing the hemp smokers, calling them misers for using hemp or other intoxicants. And then, standing right there in the street, they declare themselves to be kings."

On hearing Sonelal Kaka's words, both Madhav and Panchanand burst out laughing. Seeing that their laughter had fallen into the same rhythm, Sonelal Kaka felt that the flow of both their minds had reached level ground. But he knew that such an understanding must be based on reflection, not assumption.

Madhav said-

"Yes, that kind of thing is definitely visible."

Sonelal Kaka replied-

"Go now."

Hearing these words, Madhav became aware of his own mistake. As the realization settled in, he said-

"Kaka, I made a serious mistake by speaking against you in the Puja committee meeting without knowing or understanding you."

Since Sonelal Kaka held no trace of ill-will in his heart, he replied gently-

"Son, this is the true path of honesty to admit one's own mistake openly. As for what kind of atonement follows after admitting a fault, we won't get into that now."

Panchanand, too, accepted his mistake and said-

“Kaka, without understanding anything properly, I also went along with what Madhav had said.”

Overlooking Panchanand’s fault, Sonelal Kaka said-

“Sons, right now your duty is to study. Stop turning your gaze outward to the world and start focusing on yourself and your work. Each moment, every instant, is priceless. Learn to recognise the value of this priceless gift.” ❑

Grandfather’s Ledger

☰

Today is Diwali. In our region, many people call it Diwali Parv, while many others refer to it as Diāri Pābain. Society is society, after all. Just as it contains castes of many colours, it also holds within it different sects and varying patterns of behaviour. Whether caste and sect are passed down by birth or shaped over time is difficult to say. Just as caste has its function in the interest of social order, so too does sect. And if one looks closely, it becomes clear that both caste and sect have lowered village-society even below the seven subterranean layers described in myth: Atal, Vital, Sutal, Talatal, Rasatal, Mahatal, and Patal (abyss).

Whatever exists, exists within village society. And since everyone belongs to that society, everyone continues to look at it through his own eyes and from his own perspective.

Watching the villagers around him, Kusheshwar, a student at the intermediate level, had grown restless from about half past two or three in the afternoon. Being part of the new generation, he was swept up in the excitement of the Diāri festival and had forgotten everything else. His mind had sunk completely into the Diwali celebration, pushing all other thoughts aside.

In view of the timing, Kusheshwar had already

taken the lead in his task–that is, making the uk–but the process itself was falling behind.

What was this process, and why was it falling behind?

On the day of Diwali, children, elders, and thoughtful members of each household set aside their personal work and, before anything else, go to every shrine in the village to light lamps and place the uk on rooftops or raised ledges. That is why the uk has to be prepared first. Only then can one reach the shrines on time.

By that measure, Kusheshwar was already running late.

He could see both children and elders, just after three o'clock, setting out along the village paths. In one hand they carried flower trays with lamps and matchboxes, and in the other hand they carried the uk. Seeing this, Kusheshwar quickened his pace and focused on finishing his work. With such urgency pressing upon him, there was no reason to look back toward the past or ahead toward the future.

Seeing himself falling behind, as lamps and the uk had already been placed atop the shrines by other families while he remained late, this thought began to prick Kusheshwar sharply. His heart grew unsettled and restless. Whenever the idea arises that one ought to be ahead but instead finds oneself lagging, the mind naturally grows uneasy. In a setting already scorched by visible competition, it would hardly be possible for someone not to feel some trace of remorse or anxiety, much like Chanakya, who, when a blade of kusha grass pierced his foot, was driven by that very pain to uproot

the entire lineage of kusha.

Even so, another thought continued to surface in Kusheshwar's mind. People were still heading out into the evening. At worst, he thought, he had set out to take the lead but ended up being held back. So be it. Society exists, and being ahead or behind matters less than walking together. That is the life of our time. When everyone knows the world is in constant motion, should one judge oneself solely by one's own pace, or should one also attempt to slow down or speed up others?

After finishing the uk, Kusheshwar let out a long breath. In the field of spiritual practice, a deep breath is considered auspicious, but here, it signified something else. It was the release that comes between two tasks, the moment in which one task dissolves and another begins to take form. That breath belonged to Kusheshwar. As he exhaled deeply, his inner voice became clear. And just as a classical musician finds the right atmosphere when their tone becomes clear, Kusheshwar too found such a moment.

A question emerged clearly. What is an uk, after all? Diwali lies before everyone. People make clay lamps, fill them with oil and a wick, and light them. But what is the uk placed on the courtyard walls or the roof of a house? Brother, when someone encounters a difficult task or a tangled thought, only then does he seek help from friends, companions, or relatives. Kusheshwar's thoughts remained tangled, but suddenly he remembered his classmate, Munesar.

Without informing anyone at home, which in itself felt improper given it was Diwali, a day when many new

tasks emerge and old routines are set aside, Kusheshwar still set out for Munesar's house.

Kusheshwar and Munesar were of the same age, and both had been studying together since middle school. When Munesar saw Kusheshwar's face, he was taken aback. It was the day of the festival, yet Kusheshwar looked as if something important had gone missing.

When people speak, they often begin by asking-

"Brother, how are things?" But the meaning of such a question changes depending on whether the person being asked is in sorrow or at ease. Even today, in village life, certain values and practices still survive, where, in times of genuine need, people have offered their body, mind, and wealth without hesitation. However, those who speak of such ideals are many, while those who act upon them are few. In speech alone, there are countless people who inquire about someone's condition. If even a small number of them were truly capable of standing beside someone during difficult times, many of society's problems would resolve themselves and quietly disappear.

But this is something everyone already understands. Those who act are few, and those who merely speak are many.

Seeing the lost and unsettled expression on Kusheshwar's face, Munesar's own thoughts began to stir. A feeling arose within him. Since both of them were the same age and had studied together in the same school, he felt their understanding and behavior should also carry the same harmony. Whether Kusheshwar was simply confused or deeply troubled,

only he knew. Yet even so, a sense of responsibility naturally emerged: the feeling that a companion should not be left behind, that the path should be shared, with laughter and companionship along the way. Still, behavior is behavior. When someone appears at your doorstep, not asking how he is would be improper by any standard.

Munesar reflected that when a friend has fallen into trouble, it is gentle and affectionate words that offer comfort. There is a dilemma in this too, but that is not the concern at the moment. For now, what matters is that such gentle words are still alive, not only in speech but also in action.

Turning to Kusheshwar, Munesar asked- “Brother, how are things?”

He had already thought that, since it was a festival like Diwali, it would be better to speak with a smile. But whether the day is festive or sorrowful, gentle words are always pleasing to the ear. It is through the senses that the mind is stirred and awakened. Keeping this in mind, Munesar chose his words carefully and spoke them with a calm and steady tone.

Of course, the phrase ‘how are things?’ holds many of life’s unspoken truths, but that is a matter for another time. For now, it is enough to say that it was a festive day, and on such a day, everyone carries within them at least a quiet longing to receive something.

Kusheshwar replied-

“Brother, what kind of well-being can there be? A poor man stands no taller than a wall.”

Hearing Kusheshwar’s words, a thought rose in Munesar’s mind. Kusheshwar had more fields and land

than he himself had, and his family was larger too. Then why was he speaking like this? Munesar asked-

"What do you mean by standing no taller than a wall, Kushe brother?"

A sharp ache had already taken root in Kusheshwar's mind, because he had fallen behind in reaching the shrine with his lamp and uk. Even so, he said-

"When on a festival day like Diwali I fell behind in a duty of faith, what is left now except to dance before society?"

On hearing the word 'dance' from Kusheshwar's mouth, Munesar's mind went cold. The heaviness he had been feeling until then, on seeing Kusheshwar's lost expression, suddenly melted away, and a sense of life seemed to return to him. Munesar said-

"Brother, people come into this world to dance anyway. If you too are dancing, what's wrong with that?"

In the flow of conversation, Kusheshwar was swept along, yet the ache within him remained. All at once, his mind turned inward. But even in this turn inward, there was something missing. He could not recognize or understand himself in the way one should, and so his thoughts remained restless and lost.

Kusheshwar still had a childlike mind. After all, he was an intermediate-level student. On top of that, he was witnessing with his own eyes that he had fallen behind the villagers. In such a situation, a feeling of shame was bound to arise naturally. Kusheshwar said-

"Munesar, until the pain in the mind fades, how can the mind ever become light?"

Between companions, people often speak freely, sometimes sharply, sometimes bluntly. Munesar judged Kusheshwar and thought that even one who knows the path from heaven to hell still fears hell itself. With a hint of irritation, Munesar said-

"Kushe brother, nothing sticks to you on a festival like Diwali. Liquor and gambling are free today. Drink some bhang. In just an hour, your mind will feel light."

Kusheshwar replied-

“Mune brother, when even a moment of life feels like a mountain, you are speaking of an hour.”

Munesar reflected silently. Villagers often say the right thing, he thought. A man is one who speaks clearly and firmly. He said- “Kushe brother, Baba is sitting at the doorstep. Let’s go to him. Tell him everything. After all, he has seventy or seventy-five years of experience, and he also knows how to speak.”

Like a defeated performer, Kusheshwar accepted Munesar’s suggestion. The two of them went together to Jiyalal Baba. Jiyalal Baba recognized Kusheshwar as Munesar’s companion, and of course, as a fellow villager. As soon as they arrived, Kusheshwar said-

“Baba, I am caught between dharma and adharma, so I’ve come to you...”

Jiyalal Baba was a man who had shaped his life through inner discipline. He understood that discipline, believed in it, and lived by it. That was why there was never restlessness or haste in his mind. He firmly believed that the needs of life are never completely fulfilled for anyone. True fulfillment, he felt, is possible only for those who live with insight and awakened awareness.

Jiyalal Baba said- “Son Kushe, just as I know and accept Munesar, I accept you as his companion. So now speak of what you have earned in the ledger of your life.”

Here, pauti (ledger) carries the meaning of a receipt or balance due. In village usage, the word is commonly understood in this sense. That is why mothers often say-

“What was to be received has already been received. Now nothing remains pending in the pauti.”

Until now, Kusheshwar had only known Jiyalal Baba as Munesar’s Baba, in the way that every household in a village has its own elders. After all, a student at the intermediate level is only fifteen or sixteen years old. By age, such a child is still considered immature. In towns and cities, children of that age may move far ahead, but in villages, they are still seen as children.

Kusheshwar said-

“Baba, you not only hold old receipts, you also have a large store of wisdom. So leave aside your words for now. I have only one question.”

Jiyalal Baba replied-

“Speak.”

Kusheshwar said-

“Baba, today is the festival of Lakshmi. Lamps are to be lit, and at midnight there will be Kali Puja as well. I fell behind in my duty before the festival, while society moved ahead. Because of that, a bitterness has risen in my mind. I feel I lagged behind in a work of faith.”

On hearing Kusheshwar’s words, Jiyalal Baba

churned the question silently, just as a cotton carder churns cotton to separate the seeds. He reflected within himself that just as Munesar was still childlike, so too was Kusheshwar. And since both of them were sitting with him at that moment, it would not be right to speak words that might settle in their minds like seeds and take root.

Jiyalal Baba said-

“Son, when you do not yet understand a task or a word, it remains like a scene in darkness. When you wish to bring that task into your life because of its need or its future use, that itself becomes the festival of tomorrow. So if any ache or unease has arisen in your mind, remove it from there.”

Kusheshwar asked- “That is it, Baba?”

Jiyalal Baba replied- “Yes, what else?” ❑

Lost Our Footing

☰

Gopinath met Baldev. Both belonged to the same village and had studied together up to high school, so there was no difficulty at all in recognizing one another. Gopinath said-

"Baldev, how are things?"

Just as one feels no pain in admitting a past mistake to an old acquaintance after a long time–especially when recalling it in one's own words–Baldev replied in the same spirit-

"I lost my footing."

In Mithilanchal, Ratanpur is a middle-ranking village. Though it lies in central Mithila, its shape and character are different from many other villages. What, then, is this difference?

Close to Ratanpur lies the village of Lakshmipur, a place truly filled with prosperity. This is not to say that Lakshmi herself appears here in all her eight forms. It is only to say this: whether mango trees are counted individually or by grafts, varieties like Kalmi Maldah and Bombay Mango are found in the greatest numbers in the region around Ratanpur. The rice fields too stretch

wide, as if the village were a granary of abundance. In other villages, a yield of twenty-five or thirty seers per kattha is considered normal. But in the fields of Lakshmipur, if the harvest falls short of a full sack per kattha, the farmer begins to complain that a particular plot has betrayed him.

Brother, where land and wealth learn to play tricks, the human being–made up of six hundred trillion cells–must surely have received an even greater share of the right to deceive and be deceived.

To the west of Ratanpur lies Lakshmipur. To the east is Usrahi. When a village has a large share of barren land, its fields and embankments reflect that same barrenness. In conversation, we often say quite plainly that we live in the plains between the Ganga and the Brahmaputra. Yet within each village there exist many kinds of soil, each with its own nature and properties. Just as fire possesses the quality of heat and water the quality of coolness, soil too has its own distinct character.

Where not even a blade of kusha grass grows–that is, in Lakshmipur–kusha is entirely absent. But in the eastern village of Usrahi, thickets of kusha grass are plentiful. As the soil is, so too is the yield. That is why the productive capacity of Usrahi is weak, while Lakshmipur enjoys a far better condition. Just as rice fields serve as granaries of grain, groves of mango trees–the kings of fruits–flourish there in abundance.

This does not mean that, because Usrahi is filled with barren soil, its courtyards and homes are crowded with pale and sickly people. In any case, each village has its own character and its own unique way of life. In

one village, the measuring pole for fields is six and a half cubits long. In another, it is six and three-quarters. In a third, it measures seven cubits, while in a fourth it stretches to seven and a half. Here, a question naturally arises: when the measure itself changes from village to village, will there not be a difference in yield per kattha? Then how is one to understand the true measure of productivity at all?

We have already heard enough about the eastern and western neighbouring villages of Ratanpur. Let us leave the north and south aside for now, because in our region–that is, Mithila–all the streams flow from north to south, and for this reason, the villages lying to the north and south tend to resemble one another. Ratanpur itself, situated in between, has a character of its own. There are villages to its north and south, and this arrangement has a reason. To the east of the village runs a stream that flows throughout the year. Because of it, the fertility and reliability of the eastern embankment lands have diminished.

The groves and grafted orchards of Ratanpur have become uniform, and fragmentation has also taken place. By fragmentation, we mean this: suppose a person owns twenty bighas of land. He may not think of keeping fifteen bighas for grain and water crops and using the remaining five bighas to plant Maldah and Bombay mango grafts, with shisham trees planted all around, believing that this too would be sufficient. He does not expect returns like those from teak. But what would someone think who owns only five bighas of land, or even less? Everyone has his own life and his own means of living, and within that, each person uses his resources according to his capacity and reshapes

them as best he can. This is what fragmentation amounts to.

India is a country of villages, yet villagers have continued to abandon them. Even among those who remain, people are gradually drifting toward towns and markets. Then to whom does the country truly belong?

In any case, this question does not trouble the people of Ratanpur much. What concerns them is how life in Ratanpur is, and how it ought to be. It is also not entirely true that even God is free from partiality. He too seems to have his biases. It is visible to all that in some villages there is abundant land and few people, while in others, there are many people and very little land. Brother, if both people and villages are created by God, then why should His gaze fall in two different colours? Still, what cannot be fully forgiven may, perhaps, be forgiven just enough.

Just as a person is born carrying his own destiny and fortune, so too are villages and societies given their share of fate. In this sense, Ratanpur can be considered a fortunate village. It is true that, because of the stream, people from upstream villages may view it as a troublesome place and avoid marrying their sons and daughters there. Yet this does not mean that marriages of Ratanpur's sons and daughters do not take place or will not take place.

Half of Ratanpur consists of upland that is well-suited for orchards, plantations, and grain cultivation. The remaining half has become land that yields crops for only three or six months of the year.

There is another point worth considering. In our vast subcontinent, even Siberia lies toward the

northern edge, where farmers get only three to nine months in which cultivation is possible, while for the rest of the year the fields remain covered in snow. Seen in this way, if the fields of waterlogged villages here can still produce crops, then fields buried in snow fall only a step behind. Whatever may come, people endure it.

The people of Ratanpur too are fortunate in their destiny, in that their village is not drowned in water. Everyone has a home and a household. The people of Ratanpur are not broken by fate like those villagers who, year after year–whether one, two, three, four, or even twelve continuous years–remain scorched by drought.

There is, however, another side to Ratanpur's destiny, and it is not entirely favourable. It is different from many other villages that are rich in soil and water. Because of this, Ratanpur is a village shaped by labour. The people here regard their labour as life itself. From fishing to farming and fieldwork, they strive to build lives that are both secure and fulfilling.

True, some castes in neighbouring villages who took up fishing as an occupation lowered themselves in social rank and imposed restrictions on marriage for their sons and daughters. Yet they did not realise that they themselves had become bound by those very restrictions. They failed to understand that in a densely populated region like Mithila, it already takes five, seven, or even many years to find suitable matches for sons and daughters. When society is further divided into two or three fragments, how much longer will it take?

At a feast, one may invite guests from fifty-one villages, or even three hundred. But dividing society into smaller parts causes no visible harm only until a time of drought or scarcity coincides with the birth of a child. Then what will one do? No companion from outside will think that through on one's behalf.

If one is born with the capacity to think, then one must think fully for oneself. In a world of seven billion people, simply trying to keep pace already demands effort at every step. In such a world, nothing can be accomplished by standing by helplessly. One may choose not to run far ahead, but if one does not at least walk steadily, how will life move forward?

Gopinath and Baldev of Ratanpur had studied together up to high school. They were of the same age and belonged to the same village. For this reason, their families were different from many others in society, especially from households where there was no unity in work or way of life. A large portion of their lives, meaning a significant span of time, had been spent together. Because of this, several habits and rhythms of life had quietly shifted.

Suppose they spent four hours together, felt thirsty, and there was water in only one vessel. What would they do? Life itself would not accept the argument that one should refuse to drink another's water in the name of preserving one's religion. If such behaviour were to be called religion, then religion would be hollow.

Yet religion is not without meaning. It has always existed and will continue to exist. There is a saying in village life that as long as even a single righteous

person remains on this earth, the earth itself continues to stand firm.

It may well be that some people believe their birth was meant for ruling as masters, while others accept with a defeated heart that their birth was meant to live as the ruled. By this logic, some belong from the earth down to the underworld, while others wander in the realm of the gods. If that were not so, why would Tulsidas have written-

"Whether one is a king or not, what loss is there for me? I will not become a queen by leaving servitude."

Even Manthara had a quality of her own. It was she who, through her sharp mind, brought about the downfall of the Raghu lineage. But one must ask: was that truly her own intelligence, or had someone taught her and guided her thoughts? Whatever it was, that belonged to the age of Treta. We live in the age of Kali. Here, even human intelligence falters, while machines made of iron and steel are declared flawless.

Now consider this. When machines of iron and steel begin to take away human work, what will human hands and feet be left to do?

Just as Gopinath passed the matriculation examination in the second division, so did Baldev. Though their results were the same, their paths diverged. Gopinath passed matriculation from the science faculty, while Baldev passed from the arts faculty. After matriculation, the lives of the two took different directions.

Gopinath's name had hardly been entered in the eighth class when the thought of becoming an

engineer leapt into his mind, sudden and innocent, like a child celebrating his chhathi ritual. Though the thought stayed firmly within him, Gopinath never went around proclaiming that he was studying to become an engineer. Becoming an engineer was the fruit of life, but the journey from desire to achievement must proceed in a balanced and steady manner if one is to reach that fruit.

Everyone carries some dream within. Some awaken their willpower while awake and attain the fruit of their effort. Others do not even dismiss the dreams seen in sleep as meaningless.

After passing matriculation, Gopinath's determination grew stronger. He threw himself wholeheartedly into his studies. As a result, he secured such high marks in the I.Sc. examination that his path remained clear. There were none of the usual hurdles that arise when everyone wishes to visit a pilgrimage site at the same time. Competition has its own weight, but in this case, diligence and competition did not run parallel. They stood opposed in nature, yet from the standpoint of outcome, they became comparable. Gopinath gained admission to an engineering college. After four years, he returned to the soil of Ratanpur as an engineer.

Baldev's physical build itself showed signs of a special gift, and along with it, his voice was as sweet as a cuckoo's call. It was only natural that he grew fond of song and music. Opportunity came his way through the village satsangi group, the local music ensemble, and Baldev found a path forward. By the time he completed matriculation, he had learned to play the harmonium, the tabla, and the sitar.

Baldev's dreams soared freely, from the world of cinema's Rafi to the heights of Tansen. Because of this, his mind remained bright and joyful. Over time, or perhaps through the natural course of life, Baldev began to establish himself independently as a singer. However, his family's financial constraints soon rose as obstacles. Social conditions were changing as well. In villages everywhere, religious performances had multiplied, from ashtayam kirtan to extended devotional gatherings. This created favourable conditions for kirtan groups. Baldev formed a troupe of eight members and began to sustain his livelihood through this work.

After seven years, Gopinath and Baldev met again.❑

You Carried Them Through

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Yesterday, Ramakant Babu retired from his post as a high school teacher. Word spread through the village from ear to ear. The news reached Shrikant as well. On hearing that Ramakant Babu had retired, Shrikant stirred his own consciousness and, following that inner awakening, recalled Ramakant Babu. The moment memory surfaced, his mind whispered to itself: this is life and death. That is to say, when one gets a job, life begins. One receives life. And when one retires, the employee undergoes a kind of death.

Yet this death cannot be called the kind people usually mean when they speak of coming into the world and leaving it, of arrival on earth and departure from it. Every form of life has its own nature and character. One such nature is this: when a person is born on earth as a human being, as long as breath remains in the body, one must continue to act, to work. Work has countless forms, but the point here is only this: for a life of action, work is both the ornament of life and its very source.

There is another kind of life–the life of employment–regardless of rank or position. Once a post is obtained, binding one's entire existence within a narrow boundary, like an ox yoked to an oil press, and declaring oneself unfit for any other kind of work, may indeed be called a form of death.

Thinking silently, Shrikant read Ramakant Babu's life as if it were his own text. As he read, he decided that among all his tasks, among everything he needed to do, the most important was to go and see Ramakant Babu. His mind, until then unburdened, suddenly opened. And as it opened, the words slipped out of his mouth on their own-

"If there is anyone in the village who is truly a mother's red jewel, it is Ramakant Babu."

One may ask, what does it mean to be a mother's red jewel? In one sense, all sons are their mother's jewels. Beyond the world of emotion lie many other worlds, each with its own structure and depth, but those need not concern us here. The point is only this: a person who advances himself while also advancing his society, and in doing so helps other societies move forward as well; a family that grows in its own well-being while helping other families progress; and an individual who, while pursuing his own success, gives life to others as naturally as he lives his own life with dignity and fulfillment. Such a person alone deserves to be called a mother's red jewel.

In this topsy-turvy world, everything seems upside down. Just as we ask about life itself: what kind of life is this? What kind of life should be called a good life? If one speaks of a giver of life, then surely even that giver

is not someone who calls the wrong path right and the right path wrong. Alongside this, another question arises. Who will decide such things? There are those who determine what is good, and there are also those who decide what is harmful.

Gathering his scattered and churning thoughts, Shrikant took leave after offering quiet reassurance and support to Ramakant Babu.

Sitting alone at the doorway, Ramakant Babu was reviewing his own life. His heart was quietly filled with contentment as he looked ahead. He was seeing this: if on one side there is a single defeat or a moment of loss, and on the other side there are three moments of success and achievement, will not the scale naturally tilt toward success? Life moves easily between defeat and victory, and it will continue to do so in the future as well, even though its methods may constantly overturn and reshape themselves.

Like the boatman of a fragile, narrow boat that may capsize at any moment, there is no certainty. And how could there be? We see that the same substance can be both the king of poisons and the medicine for poison. When poison becomes medicine, it turns divine. When it exceeds its limit, it becomes disease-giving once again. Even this contains its own uncertainty. Balance is reached only when there is an understanding of measure. If that understanding is absent, then one is bound to stumble and grope forward.

From a little distance near the doorway, Shrikant spoke- “Brother, I have heard the bit of flying news.”

Before Shrikant’s words could fully settle,

Ramakant Babu replied- "Yes, yes, you heard it right. But my own mind still refuses to accept that I have retired."

Seeing the quiet joy rising in Ramakant Babu's face, Shrikant pressed down the reassurance he had been carrying within himself and said softly,

"Brother sahib, you have helped our family survive. You have carried them through."

If retirement had brought any sorrow to Ramakant Babu, that would have been another matter. But there was none. Reading the Gita had strengthened his mind to such an extent that life appeared to him just as it is described there: as old clothes are cast off and new ones worn, so too is life.

Hearing Shrikant's words, Ramakant Babu's mind stirred. What stirred him was this thought: what favour had I ever done for Shrikant that he speaks with such joy? Then he reflected again and understood that probing such thoughts again and again would only awaken a sense of self-importance. True discipline lies in remaining poised between praise and criticism.

There is no shortage of people who take pleasure in hearing their own praise spoken to their face and feel delighted within. But that was not in keeping with his nature. Life is such that if ill-will is removed from the mind, even a blade of grass–an ordinary thing–can become life-giving to someone. Yet that sense of life-giving virtue disappears where benefit and harm stand face to face, a confrontation that continues endlessly.

The reason is that human life has reached a point where actions and thoughts–whether good or improper–have lost clear direction. The same hand that

performs a good deed is also capable of causing harm. The same mouth that speaks noble thoughts can also utter ignoble ones. The same holds true for thought itself.

If good and bad actions and thoughts were weighed carefully on a proper scale, they would surely become refined. But society has taken such a form that even those who speak cannot clearly distinguish what is good and what is bad. It has become equally difficult to understand where goodness ends and wrongdoing begins.

Two people sat together and began to discuss: if a son were born, what should he become?

The husband said- “He should become a lawyer.”

Hearing this, the wife objected- “That would not be good.”

The husband asked- “Then what?”

The wife replied- “He should become a doctor.”

An argument began between the two. Seeing their dispute, the mother came and asked-

“Why are the two of you arguing?”

The son said- “Mother, you yourself can see that we are business people. Then why do we spend entire days running after lawyers?”

Hearing the son’s words, the mother felt reassured that he was speaking correctly. She then asked her daughter-in-law-

“What do you think?”

The daughter-in-law replied- “Ever since asthma appeared, so many illnesses have entered the human body. That is why the child should become a doctor: so

that life may be saved.”

Listening to the views of the son and the daughter-in-law, the mother’s nerves and entire nervous system were so disturbed that the body’s internal chemistry and balance seemed to collapse. Such is the play of society and of human beings. One sees that while one student studies day and night with dedication to earn the title of doctor, another purchases it with money, as if buying goods in a market. This does not mean that such people do not perform rituals, vows, offerings, or prayers to obtain it. They do. During the festival of Chhath, the Sun is not regarded as a child. In the end, those who understand, understand in their own way.

Seeing the vitality in Ramakant Babu’s life, Shrikant quietly kept his thoughts to himself and rose to take his leave.

Ramakant Babu had retired from the post of headmaster at the high school. Just as there are natural forests and groves formed by nature itself, so too are there creations shaped by human hands. Suppose one considers a forest made up of sal, teak, and similar trees, along with fruit-bearing trees like orange and lemon. In the same way, a forest can also be created by planting trees. The difference lies in this: a natural forest exists within an unlimited expanse, while one created by human effort remains confined to a limited boundary. That is why human effort is only a part, while nature is whole. This is precisely what is expressed in the opening verse of the Mundaka Upanishad-

“Om, that is whole, this is whole.”

In any case, those who have spoken, and those

who have read and heard, know what is bitter and what is sweet. We often hear it said that the swan can separate milk from water. Yet it is also true that lemon juice can divide milk into two parts. Such a quality is not found in fish, and yet it exists. In the same way, we caution the unthinking and say-

"Brother, eat either milk or fish–both are allowed–but do not eat them together."

The question here is not about the objects themselves, but about their properties, about acidity. In his own way, the human being too is a swan.

From early childhood, observing the shape and direction of society, Ramakant Babu's mind gradually turned away from the ignoble and moved toward the good. People often say that even from the burning of ragi, one could once prepare ink for writing. Whatever was done, was done. The complete duty of one's life lay in this alone: that on any given day, none of one's actions should cause harm. Even between benefit and harm, there is a difference.

There are some actions and thoughts whose consequences are immediately visible, like falling into a well or jumping from a three-storey building. But not all acts of life are so transparent. Drop a single ragi flatbread into a kilo of milk, and within ten or fifteen minutes, it will soak up all the milk. Yet no one stops to consider whether the body can drink blood in the same way. As for the question of good and bad, the world is the world. In the same object or the same thought, both qualities are always present. To test and separate them, that is the task of the swan.

When he entered the teaching profession, a

thought had arisen in Ramakant Babu's mind: what is seen is often more reliable than what is merely heard. Yet it is also true that both seeing and hearing can be valuable in their own way, and neither is necessarily distorted. This is the world; everything exists in it. But to attain anything within it requires discipline. How could it be otherwise, when people's thinking has long been shaped by the tendency to claim their rights in full, yet refuse to bear even a fraction of their duties? There is no shortage of those who deliver discourses on the Gita, but few are willing to live by its principles themselves.

After completing his BA, Ramakant Babu began his career as a high school teacher in his own village. A village society that had passed through thousands of years of subjugation naturally suffered from a lack of educational institutions. At that time, seven teachers were posted at the school. Even before formally joining, Ramakant Babu had planted a firm resolve in his heart: he would never discriminate against any student, nor would he ever beat a child with a stick or strike them with his hand.

A child with a tender mind does not learn everything in a single day. But if taught with patience and made to practise steadily–like counting the beads of a tulsi rosary–he will eventually learn. Ramakant Babu also understood within himself that the practice of beating students in schools was a disease born of arrogance. That may have been accepted once, but times change. One must move in accordance with the present environment.

Ramakant Babu's affection was not limited only to

teachers or students. It arose from a deep sense of inner balance that had awakened within him. He had come to understand clearly that children from poor families often fail to reach school simply because of poverty. Therefore, it was necessary to guide not only the child but also the family, to offer them a direction and a broader vision.

Shrikant had five children: three sons and two daughters, a large family. One could easily argue that after two children, a working man ought to undergo an operation. But such an operation is a human invention. The growth of children follows the rhythm of the seasons, and in Mithila, that rhythm is favourable. No matter how many people leave Mithila or try to flee, the population continues to grow and does not fall behind.

Thoughts like these did not trouble Ramakant Babu. What stirred within him instead was the memory of how he had helped Shrikant–burdened by a large family–to stand on his own feet as a cultivator and sharecropper. He remembered how he had supported Shrikant's eldest son, Manohar, nurturing him like his own child until he rose to the position of a high school teacher.

At that moment, his wife arrived and stood before him, bringing his tea. Mixing the wish of his mind with the simple desire for a drink, Ramakant Babu began to sip quietly. ❑

Reverence

☰

The high school of Simrahi village is not merely a local institution; it is a well-known school across the surrounding districts. Just as its teachers are carefully selected and appointed, so too are its students. Here-

“carefully selected” means chosen according to need, neither too few nor too many. It is not the case that, for the sake of personal factions or favoritism, teachers are appointed who ultimately harm the quality of education. Nor is it the case that, simply to accommodate one's own people, numbers are inflated beyond necessity, resulting in little actual work while increasing the school’s financial burden.

What happens elsewhere is of no concern to the management of Simrahi School. Their concern is only this: as long as responsibility rests on their shoulders and a burden must be carried, it should be borne with devotion and balance, like Shravan Kumar carrying his parents. Otherwise, distance begins to grow between people, and separation takes root even within one’s own mind. When a system remains balanced, then if not everything, at least most of the school’s activities begin to move in harmony.

At this very high school in Simrahi village, Manmohan Babu is also a teacher. Among the teaching staff, if one were to speak of closeness, of heartfelt connection, of genuine affinity, then apart from Manmohan Babu, there is only one other teacher of such standing. Among the remaining sixteen, some are satisfied in their stomachs, some in their minds, and some in neither. The rest are simply like a pair of bullocks tied together for threshing, bound side by side by circumstance. That is why no one raises objections even when they must sit together at feasts or communal meals. No one feels that, in the name of a shared meal, someone is unfairly taking something from another.

During the course of teaching, and speaking with both concern and reverence for the students, Manmohan Babu said- “In today’s environment, neither does the teacher retain reverence for the student, nor does the student retain reverence for the teacher.”

The scope of Simrahi High School is somewhat broad. Unlike city markets where high schools are packed almost shoulder to shoulder, Simrahi village does not have that kind of density. There is only one high school within a stretch of twenty kilometers, and therefore, its reach is extensive in terms of area. This is not to suggest that schools in towns and cities lack structure or reach. In cities, population growth itself creates that scope.

The high school runs four classes, from eighth to eleventh, each with two sections.

As the students sat in the classroom listening to Manmohan Babu’s words, Mukund and Hareram were among them. Just as Mukund felt a stir in his mind on

hearing Manmohan Babu's thoughts, Hareram experienced the same disturbance. Both were students of the ninth class. Both belonged to the same village and the same neighbourhood. Because of this, a certain similarity existed in their intellectual level.

It cannot be said that students of the same class necessarily share the same mental quality or temperament, yet village and society shape their own patterns of influence and ideas of honour. How does this happen? Consider the illness of the city: foeticide. Has it not reached the villages too? It certainly has. One can already see an imbalance in the number of sons and daughters emerging even in village households. Socially, it may not yet be fully visible, but at the individual level, the problem is beginning to surface from village to village. This is creating conditions where caste and social bonds begin to weaken. When a gap appears in the number of boys and girls, unrest is inevitable. But whatever the situation may be, it exists.

After the bell rang, that is, after half past four, something different happened compared to other days. Just as Mukund hesitantly moved toward Hareram, Hareram too stepped toward Mukund. The difference was this: on ordinary days, once school ended, everyone went home on their own. Today, that didn't happen.

When they met in one place, Mukund said-

"Hareram bhai, how did you find what Manmohan Babu taught today?"

When bitterness and sweetness are clearly defined, even a child can understand them. But when something is neither entirely bitter nor fully sweet, deciding how to describe it becomes difficult. Social

surroundings influence a person in the same way that the atmosphere shapes one's emotional and mental world. When curiosity awakens in the realm of thought, the ground of feeling begins to take shape.

Hareram replied-

“Mukund bhai, Master Sahib speaks so quickly, at such a fast pace, that more than half the time we hear him, but we don’t truly understand.”

When someone speaks from within one atmosphere and the listener’s inner state lacks alertness, then even words heard clearly fail to awaken the mind. Hareram, a student of class nine, was caught in such an in-between state. Such an atmosphere of understanding arises only when one reflects deeply and turns inward solitude into wider, more connected engagement. That had not yet happened for him.

Still, it would not be right to say that Hareram was entirely dull or foolish. Even cow dung has its value. Though it may smell unpleasant when stuck to the body, in the fields it is truly a sibling of Lakshmi, the goddess of abundance.

Until now, like most children shaped by a rural environment, the students here–meaning up to high school–had developed a manner of conduct toward their teachers that was of a high order. They were not like unruly boys who walk along the road smoking cigarettes and blowing smoke into a teacher’s face. Even here, the fault is not entirely the child's. Society also bears responsibility, for it is society that creates the environment.

It is also not true that some problems arise only at the individual level and never at the social level. Day

and night, society listens to recitations of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata blaring from loudspeakers. Then why has the institution of marriage become so complicated? Why has it produced a condition of social decline? One may ask: what fault lies in the Ramayana or the Mahabharata? Where is the fault? The fault lies only in this: from Sita's svayamvara to Draupadi's disrobing, the meaning has been lost to the mind.

In the Mahabharata, not one but many relationships are formed in ways that people condemn with their words, yet repeat in practice. Such is the play of society. While taking dowry, people proclaim that the times have changed, yet they cling to the conduct of the Satya Yuga. But in today's context, the ideals of the Satya Yuga require some adjustment. Otherwise, how can the past ever become the present? At the very least, one must have the discernment to abandon what has become impractical and reshape the rest to harmonise with the present environment. Only then can a living and evolving social order be formed.

For now, the jolt of thought that had stirred in both Mukund and Hareram suited their own lives. Like Mukund, Hareram too had shaped his conduct toward teachers in accordance with his own understanding. In this context, when their teacher said aloud- "Neither do teachers have reverence for students, nor do students have reverence for teachers," the words struck them both deeply.

Let us set aside half of that statement. Teachers may shape their own sense of reverence as they wish. But as far as Mukund and Hareram were concerned,

their respect for Manmohan Babu remained intact. Then why not seek clarification directly? They thought that if they waited to ask until after reaching home, many obstacles might arise in the meantime. So why not go now and ask Master Sahib directly?

Both were of the same age, and the thought was shared. Because of this, a surge of energy arose within them, whether one calls it resolve, bodily electricity, or a sudden chemical impulse. Without delay, they set off. Both went straight and caught up with Manmohan Babu at the back doorway.

They were students of the ninth class, and by then hunger and thirst had already begun to trouble them. As soon as they reached the doorway, Mukund turned to Manmohan Babu and said- “Sir, today what you said...”

Before Mukund could even complete half of what he intended to say, Manmohan Babu interrupted gently- “Son, first go and wash your hands and feet at the hand pump. I will also change my clothes and freshen up. Then we’ll have a snack, drink some tea, and after that, I will answer whatever questions you have.”

Even the mere anticipation of a task can give rise to trust in it. As instructed, both boys placed their books and notebooks on the bench and went to wash up at the hand pump. Meanwhile, seeing all three of them together, Manmohan Babu’s wife, Vinita, busied herself with the preparations.

After changing clothes and freshening up, Manmohan Babu returned and sat at the doorway. When he saw Vinita approaching with snacks for all

three, he felt a quiet sense of joy. She placed the snacks on the bench and went into the other room to prepare tea.

While they ate, Manmohan Babu began to speak,

"Sons, just like you, I too have been engaged in schoolwork since ten this morning. Now, just as you feel drained, so do I. Whatever second task one takes up afterward, there is always a phase that has passed and another yet to begin. That in-between time is a period of release, and it too has its own process."

Just then, Vinita returned with three cups of tea and stood in front of Manmohan Babu. But inwardly, she hesitated. The hesitation came from the delicate nature of the teacher-student relationship. If she herself offered tea directly to the boys, someone might criticise her later.

Sensing the hesitation in her mind, Manmohan Babu smiled and said-

"That era has passed when, after conducting one hundred and fourteen thousand marriages, someone became a universal emperor. Today, the relationship between teacher and student should be like that of an elder and younger sibling, where they understand each other's strengths and weaknesses in life and keep the bridge between guru and disciple alive and meaningful."

On hearing her husband's words, Vinita did not involve herself further. This was a conversation between teacher and students. She quietly stepped away from the doorway and returned to her household tasks.

Manmohan Babu then asked- "So, sons, what was

it you began to ask?"

Mukund replied- "Sir, today you said that the environment has become such that neither do teachers retain reverence for students, nor do students for teachers."

Manmohan Babu responded-

"Sons, all three of us are connected with Simrahi High School. But across the country, there are countless high schools, colleges, and middle schools. Everywhere, there are teachers and students. So the relationship we are speaking of is not limited to just you and me. First, set aside the notion that I alone am the teacher and you alone are the students. This is a collective issue, and it must be viewed as such.

"In a rural setting, the condition of schools is such that children up to the high school level can still be called children of tender understanding. Yet within human beings lies the seed of resolve and willpower. In a fertile land like Mithila, where many great individuals–long before the age of fifteen–took to renunciation and set out to wander the world, this seed has always found nourishment. If there were only one or two such figures, we could name them. But the moment one name is mentioned, the question arises: what about the others? Tired of such comparisons, Tulsidas himself said- 'Who is so great that he may call another an offender?'"

Mukund began silently churning these words in his mind. Meanwhile, Hareram spoke-

"Sir, teachers know, and students know too. But what exactly is reverence? Could you explain a little?"

Hearing the phrase 'a little' from Hareram's

mouth, Manmohan Babu paused to reflect. What did ‘a little’ really mean? Just as bread takes the shape of the hand that breaks it, he thought, offering fragmented speech would not lead them forward, just as their coming to his doorway today had not been a mere accident. He decided it would be better to speak of reverence from the very root.

Manmohan Babu said-

“Son, reverence means concentrated desire. When a deep desire arises toward someone or something, it naturally opens many doors of behaviour and conduct related to it.”

Hearing this, Hareram began to test the idea from all sides, weighing it from every angle. Seeing him so intent, Manmohan Babu expanded the scope of his explanation and continued-

“Son, when reverence becomes unstable, it moves along the path of experience and transforms into perception.”

Hareram looked as if a veil had suddenly lifted. Glancing around, he asked-

“Perception?”

Manmohan Babu replied-

“Yes, perception. Perception means conviction, faith, or the development of qualitative strength. The next stage after perception is interest. Interest means affection. When perception arises, affection follows naturally. This much is enough for today. We’ll take the next step another day.” ❑

Living on Another's Support

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Amtahi is a village. Among the thousands of villages, Amtahi has its own distinct character and identity. It is not a village inhabited solely by twelve castes, as found in some places, nor is it a village of a single caste. Instead, it has settlements from eleven castes. About forty years ago, Amtahi consisted of eight castes, but over the past four decades, three more have joined.

How did these three castes arrive? They came from other villages and settled here in various ways: as sons-in-law, as maternal relatives, and through similar social ties. In the same way, landless villagers from elsewhere have also arrived and taken root here. These were people without hereditary caste occupations, such as barbers who cut hair or potters who made earthenware. Some women also came as maids or domestic attendants and eventually settled here. But those are stories from other villages. Amtahi has its own history. Among its residents is Dularchan Kaka.

The formation of eight to nine castes in Amtahi happened in a particular pattern. In this village of three

hundred households, four castes are similar in terms of wealth and social standing. Because of this, these four castes are both socially dominant and physically strong. As in other villages, devotional singing of Sita and Ram takes place in Amtahi too.

Everyone understands this much: the union of Sita and Ram did not occur merely through the ritual of swayamvar. What is swayamvar, after all? It is the choosing of a life partner with the commitment to share life itself. If that were truly the case, why does the spectre of dowry still haunt parents?

Among those four castes, a boy from one and a girl from another fell in love while studying in high school and got married.

Some might argue that high school students are minors, so why was no legal action taken? But one must consider the context of that time. Back then, child marriage was still legally accepted, and the idea of adult marriage had not yet become a public issue.

Discussion of their marriage spread through the village of Amtahi. When a boy from a lower-regarded household marries a girl from a higher-regarded one, violence, assault, and police cases often follow. But even where both sides are considered socially equal, matters are not always resolved through village mediation alone.

In this case, both castes–the boy's and the girl's–held their own councils and decided to excommunicate the couple from their respective communities. At the time to which this incident belongs, caste excommunication functioned much like today's legal codes, as real and binding as sections one hundred

seven or one hundred forty-four are now.

Since both the boy and the girl had studied together up to high school, they stood firmly by their decision. They declared that if their castes had rejected them, they would reject those castes in return. They would form a separate caste of their own. It is not the case that a writer or a scientist, simply by being outside the traditional caste system, is excluded from recognition. They too hold the right to deny recognition to those who refuse to acknowledge them. In this way, Amtahi's ninth caste came into being. The history of the tenth and eleventh castes is different.

At the time of this first incident, when the ninth caste was formed, another trend arose alongside it. Each caste decided that its own priests would henceforth perform all rituals, including worship, ancestral rites, and marriages. Just as armies are recruited in wartime, farm labourers during the monsoon planting season, and mill workers in late winter, priests too began to be recruited, village by village.

Until then, people had always carried out agricultural work themselves, while rituals such as worship, funerary rites, and marriages were conducted by others. That practice largely continues even now, though some changes have certainly occurred.

In the village of Amtahi, the same gust of change began to blow. Among the eight castes, four stood firmly apart and declared that they would not separate themselves from their inherited religious paths. They might have understood things better had they reflected that sanātan itself means ancient. With time, life inevitably changes. And when life changes, some

old customs break, some are reshaped, and some entirely new practices emerge.

Among the remaining four castes of the village, one saw a local worshipper rise up and take responsibility. But in the other three, where there were no educated members, the position of village priest remained vacant. Over time, priests from one village began performing rituals for castes in another. Gradually, priestly families emerged across different villages. By good fortune, two such families took root in Amtahi itself. Performing ancestral rites, marriages, and religious ceremonies became their livelihood.

It should not be misunderstood that the rise of caste-based priests left the Sanskritic ritual traditions, passed down through texts and manuals, undisturbed. In the systems of thought and action that prevail among us, there is both harmony and imbalance. In any case, such questions do not particularly trouble Amtahi. Whether a village bears sweet fruit like mango or sour ones like tamarind, each has its own owner, and people act according to their own inclinations.

With the spread of priests from village to village, a new social group took shape. Marriage practices grew more regulated. Those who performed rituals began arranging marriages for their sons and daughters within their professional networks and work-based circles. Alongside this, both in behaviour and in thought, changes began to appear in how castes regarded one another. Signs of superiority emerged.

Within the two priestly families of Amtahi–each belonging to a different caste–the earlier additions to the village's caste structure were echoed once more.

The first incident had added one caste, and the settlement of priests had added another. Now a third was added when marriages took place between priestly families themselves. In this way, Amtahi became a village of eleven castes.

The old forest groves of Amtahi are no longer there, yet like a wandering bard, the village still carries its name. And like a man limping forward on one disabled leg, the village, too, moves ahead, limping but persistent. Who exactly is moving forward, however, is not something a healer or exorcist can explain by reciting charms, whether counting from one to a hundred or from ninety-nine down to one. Society itself is such that it places more faith in the chant of ninety-nine than in that of one.

Had people understood the root of such mantras, they would have known to whom they truly belong. A mantra belongs to the one who may or may not be affected by poison. What matters first is the simple act of touching water.

Dularchan Kaka’s family belong to the village’s middle-ranked farming households. In the village, those families who depend only on themselves, that is, those who have no land, fields, cattle, and who rely solely on their own labour for survival, are called self-dependent. Dularchan Kaka is one of them. He has resources of his own and fixed means, yet by joining effort with discipline, he continues to guide his life along a stream of quiet contentment.

Just as Dularchan Kaka lives his life like a seeker, always absorbed in inner discipline, his wife Shyama too, like Savitri, has always followed her husband’s thoughts and actions with steadfast devotion. When

Dularchan Kaka was twenty-five and Shyama twenty-four, their son Mohit was born. Being the first child of the family, Mohit naturally received the first share of a firstborn's attention and care. By the time Dularchan Kaka turned forty, Mohit was already a student of the eleventh class in high school.

In government service, there are fixed, regulated holidays. But in the working life of agriculture, there are no such bindings. Nature itself grants pauses and intervals, often more generous than official leave. Today, Dularchan Kaka found himself with a break of two and a half to three hours.

He has never shaped his life like a factory, where one day the shift runs from ten at night to six in the morning, the next day from six in the morning to two in the afternoon, and the third from two in the afternoon to ten at night. The real question is the balance between work and time.

A duty from ten at night to six in the morning may be technically acceptable for a machine that runs twenty-four hours. But without time-appropriate balance, the human body inevitably suffers damage.

After drinking his early morning tea, Dularchan Kaka said to his wife-

"May I ask you something?"

In his mind, Dularchan Kaka believed that if he sought permission before speaking, he would not be at fault. Words and dialogue, the very means of expression, can distribute nectar, but they can also spread the fire and ash of a volcano.

Shyama replied- "Today you seem unusually insistent. Is there some secret?"

Dularchan Kaka said- "Those who are inclined toward mystery speak in riddles. I am no mystic. This is a question of my own life."

With a tone of gentle authority, Shyama said-

"Speak. Say whatever your heart wishes."

Dularchan Kaka said-

"God has arranged one good coincidence for the two of us, that the difference in our ages is not very large."

Hearing her husband's words, Shyama asked-

"What do you mean?"

Dularchan Kaka replied-

"In societies or castes where the practice of child marriage exists, this kind of problem is not found. But in societies where marriage takes place in youth, there is an imbalance in the ages of boys and girls."

Listening to her husband's thoughts, Shyama's mind grew restless. Why was he speaking like this for no reason? It felt as if their own life and family had no value at all. She said- "Is that why you asked me?"

Dularchan Kaka understood inwardly that his wife's mind had begun to stir with a desire to grasp something. He said-

"There is no certainty in fate. Today the two of us are running the family together. But if I were to die, how would you manage my share of the work? And if you could not manage it, would the family not collapse and fall apart?"

Just as an inexperienced, reckless hand throws a stone at a mango tree without aim, yet it happens to strike a ripe mango and bring it down, Shyama replied-

"If you die and that burden falls on me, then if I die, will the burden not fall on you as well?"

Hearing his wife's words, Dularchan Kaka felt a quiet satisfaction within himself that she too understood the joys and sorrows of life. Trying to restore balance, he said-

"No one is given skill without purpose in life. The same skill that feeds one person betel also ends up feeding another a shoe."

Seeing Dularchan Kaka fall silent, Shyama rose and walked away.

What Dularchan Kaka gained from his wife's words, only he himself knew. But the unease in his mind began to grow slowly. Since it was Sunday, Mohit too had no school and was at home in his room. Dularchan Kaka called out to him-

"Mohit, come here for a moment."

Hearing his father's voice, Mohit replied at once, without hesitation or delay,

"I'm coming."

When one goes to meet someone, it may not always be possible to come face to face at once. But if the person's voice is heard, then at least the possibility is created that the meeting will happen. Along with his voice, Mohit stepped out of the room and stood at the doorway, directly facing his father.

Dularchan Kaka said-

"Son, you are already fifteen years old and studying for the matriculation examination. After six months you will move beyond high school. What do you think and understand about yourself?"

Until now, no restlessness had entered Mohit's childlike nature. That restlessness comes with maturity of vision, and it had not yet arrived. He knew only what lay within the course textbooks. Mohit replied-

"I don't understand anything."

Dularchan Kaka said-

"Now that you are a matriculation student, shouldn't you also begin to think about what you see with your own eyes, about yourself and about your family and society?"

Hearing his father's words, Mohit fell silent. Seeing this silence, Dularchan Kaka continued-

"Son, you will have to learn for yourself and act for yourself. If you receive some opportunity from someone, that is a coincidence, a matter of chance. But one thing is clear. There is no guarantee of anyone's life. Anyone can die at any time. Suppose I were to die. How would you then carry forward your life?"

Hearing his father's words, Mohit was stunned and began to think inwardly. His thought is a hard truth. But...

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